

Visions of Carn Brea: The Labouring-Class Poetry of John Harris (1820-1884)

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## Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the nineteenth-century labouring-class poet, John Harris (1820-1884). Harris was a Cornish miner who managed to educate and raise himself to be a cleric in Falmouth. He published fifteen volumes of poetry during his lifetime, all of which received the attention of various national literary presses. Harris won the Shakespeare tercentenary prize in 1864 and was the first winner from a labouring-class background. Harris has received very little critical attention after his death and this thesis argues that, as a conservative labouring-class poet he is out of fashion. It explores how critical attention has overwhelmingly focused on radical labouring-class poets such as Chartists. This thesis argues however that during his lifetime Harris's work was, for a time at least, fashionable and attractive to the upper classes because of the politically conservative stances he took and that his politics meant he was able to attract patronage. Harris's 'value' to patrons as a paragon of Victorian religious virtue and industry was an expedient example to his labouring peers. I will argue that Harris is worthy of note not just because of his somewhat unusual politics but also because of the idiosyncratic thematic and formal qualities of his corpus. Harris's autobiography confirms that his self-presentation was central in gaining patronage which ranged from individuals with wealth and social standing who sponsored him when his writing was in its infancy to the literary institutions and prominent individuals that provided support to him as he attempted to maintain and develop his literary career. The influence of his patrons on the thematic concerns of Harris's corpus have caused him to be ignored by literary critics due to its surface level conservatism. A closer examination reveals Harris's idiosyncratic hybridisation of the conventions of eighteenth-century Romanticism and nineteenth-century poetics concluding that in an era where metrical schemes were abundant, Harris was a master and innovator of form.

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## Introduction

This thesis explores the life, work, social, and literary context of the Cornish labouring-class miner poet, John Harris (1820–1884). Harris published 15 volumes of verse throughout the nineteenth century, all of which received positive attention in national literary periodicals. After entering a competition to write a poem in praise of Shakespeare, John Harris also won the Shakespeare Tercentenary prize in 1868. This was a poetry competition organised by Coventry Town Council and held in Stratford-upon-Avon. The poem was the only one held in the Shakespeare museum written by a working man at the time of its composition. Despite these distinct and material achievements, critical attention on Harris's corpus has not progressed beyond the class-bound conventions of nineteenth-century criticism. The large majority of critical feedback Harris received during his lifetime was a composite of commentary on his personal circumstances and the thematic concerns of his work. Criticism of his work focused on Harris as a positive moral example to his peers as he had 'bettered' his labouring-class status as a miner by adopting the civilised literary pursuits of the middle classes. Harris's becoming a poet as a separate activity to his job working underground served to furnish his reviewers with the perception that in a dynamic and progressive age like the Victorian era, success and improvement were available to all regardless of their social status. As discussed in Chapter 1, Harris's self-presentation in his life story, entitled *My Autobiography* (1884), frames his life in this context by showing his progression from a studious boy to an uncomplaining miner intent on self-development. Harris's life story culminates in him winning a literary prize. He also escapes the mine by becoming a scripture reader at Falmouth and his publishing career is sustained until his death.

This thesis argues that Harris's popularity with his mentors and social superiors was supported as he used his literary abilities to espouse and reinforce the dominant ideologies

of the era. A cursory reading of his corpus suggests a man who accepted poorly paid and life-threatening labour (mining) as examples of providence instead of ruthless exploitation from middle-class entrepreneurs and businessmen. Several poems in the first volume of his work, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (1856) describe the deaths of his colleagues. In these poems, Harris offers the consolation of the afterlife to miners who died in accidents brought on by the greed and negligence of his social superiors. Often this treatment by employers was so that they could accrue maximum profits for minimum outlay. This seems a strange attitude until the power dynamics involved in achieving publication for labouring-class poets is considered. In his life story, Harris reveals that his first poetic composition, a socialistically motivated work supporting miners in a strike, was regarded as not worth printing by a local newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he was faced with a stark decision: to not publish at all or to produce work that, at least on the surface, conformed with the era's dominant ideologies. Amongst the labouring-class poets of the nineteenth-century, John Harris was exceptional. He was a literate and well-read miner who composed poetry with aspirations to be perceived as a literary writer. Unfortunately, it was these exceptional qualities that John Harris's critics used against him. I use the word 'against' in a modern-day context as this would not have been his critics' perception at all. For them, his principal achievement was just being a poet; the idea of critical engagement with the work itself — its formal structures and their efficacy would simply not have occurred to them. A sense of placing Harris's poetry or any labouring-class poet in any kind of hierarchy alongside middle- and/or upper-class literary luminaries like Tennyson was unthinkable. Harris was a labouring-class man, whose poetry dignified both himself and his occupation. The strict social paradigms of the Victorian era were such that although core values of hard work and stoicism were being trumpeted as routes to success, these ideologies only referred to mobility within certain fields and social class boundaries. It might have been acceptable for Harris to aspire to be a mine captain but never a well-

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<sup>1</sup> John Harris, *My Autobiography* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1882), pp. 55-56.

regarded poet. What was of use though, was a man whose writing promoted stoicism and acceptance amongst his peers; offered the comforts of religion and was a strong advocate for temperance. Despite being poor and disadvantaged, Harris used his facility with words to turn these three aforementioned attributes into his poetic stock in trade. Ironically, it was the thematic dominance of this message of acceptance and conservatism that allowed Harris to experience a lifetime of significant success as a labouring-class writer, as the messages and values of his work were useful to his patrons and mentors and had the potential to influence his fellow labouring-class peers.

However, that is not to say that subversion does not feature at all in Harris's writing. His descriptions of the collegiate and self-sacrificing behaviour of miners underground dignifies an occupation that was perceived to be sub-human by the middle classes, and this is something that is explored in Chapter 3. Furthermore, once Harris was able to escape the mine in his role as a scripture reader at the age of 37, he was able to gain the support of mentors that enabled him to strongly espouse anti-war sentiments which did not always correlate with established views at the time. Examples of this kind of writing can be found in his later collections such as *Cruise of the Cutter* (1872) and *Two Giants* (1878) which characterise war and those that perpetrate it in highly negative terms. These books are considered in Chapter 4 where it becomes clear that characterising Harris as politically conservative becomes more complex than some critics such as Paul Newman have previously thought.<sup>2</sup>

After his death in 1884, Harris has only received limited critical attention as a poet. This thesis argues that an historic trend that began in the 1970s, which principally focused on more politicised poets of the nineteenth century, has only begun to be challenged by a

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Newman, *The Meads of Love: The Life and Poetry of John Harris (1820-84)* (Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1994), pp. 139-40.

more inclusive approach over the last 20 years beginning with John Goodridge's *Labouring-Class Poets Online* database in 2001.<sup>3</sup>

The early twentieth century saw Harris receiving his last piece of critical attention until the 1980s. This was a savaging from the Devonshire folklorist Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924). Baring-Gould praises Harris's receptivity as a poet but views his formal abilities with contempt. His incomprehension of Harris's poetry and self-presentation is explored towards the close of Chapter 1 to try and understand Baring-Gould's criticisms in context. It establishes that it was most likely that Harris's use of the literary conventions of the middle classes irked Baring-Gould.

Contemporary critics such as Martha Vicinus and Peter Scheckner have taken a different stance in their arguments around the revival of labouring-class poets. They have mainly focused on those who take a more radical political stance or make divergent formal decisions, arguing that due to their reactionary politics or their use of dialect in their writing, these poets embody a genuine labouring-class voice. Poets like Harris whose politics were more artfully hidden under the surface have been dismissed as servile, conservative, and wishing to climb the class ladder to literary acceptance rather than agitate for change. To these critics, it would seem that from their often middle-class perspective, this is a betrayal of these poets labouring-class origins. Therefore, poets like Harris are caught in a double bind for modern day critics: too aspirational for their literary betters and not reactionary enough for the literary critics of the future.

The origins of contemporary academic criticism in the 1970s did not seem entirely reflective of the vast majority of extant labouring-class poetry from the nineteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> John Goodridge, 'Introduction to the Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets and Poetry, 1700-1900', *Labouring-Class Poets Online* (2001), <<https://lcpoets.wordpress.com/introtobibliography/>> [accessed 18 November 2023]

Martha Vicinus comments that the vast majority of it is imitative in *The Industrial Muse* and focuses three out of the six chapters of her book on poets with revolutionary intent including street ballads and broadsides, literature as propaganda, and Chartist poetry and fiction.<sup>4</sup> Peter Scheckner's *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry* places an exclusive emphasis on politicised poets and even goes as far as observing that Chartist poetry has 'been largely ignored in the United States and slighted in England'.<sup>5</sup> This is despite Vicinus devoting a whole chapter to it over a decade previously in *The Industrial Muse* and being an American herself. Kevin Binfield's and William J. Christmas's *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century* includes four chapters on labouring-class poets with political themes. Three of them are focused on Chartist poets.<sup>6</sup> Kirstie Blair's and Mina Gorji's *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900* contains a chapter on Chartism despite a more generally wide-ranging approach to labouring-class poetics.<sup>7</sup> This heavy focus on overtly politicised poets does not always take into account that they were literary reactionaries in an era where adopting this stance was extremely challenging. In fact, it was so challenging that most labouring-class poetry with a reactionary flavour such as those of the Chartists was often published by small and sympathetic presses who specialised in this kind of work.<sup>8</sup> However, over the last twenty years, a more inclusive tone has developed. Florence Boos edited the collection *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain* in 2008.<sup>9</sup> Archival

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), pp. vi-5.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Scheckner, 'Introduction', in *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s–1850s*, ed. by Peter Scheckner (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), pp. 15-58 (p. 15).

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas, 'Contents', in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018), pp. vii–x.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sanders, 'Courtly Lays or Democratic Songs? The Politics of Poetic Citation in Chartist Literary Criticism', in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900*, ed. by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 156-73.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Sanders, "Teaching Chartist Literature", in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Binfield and Christmas, pp. 136-37.

<sup>9</sup> *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology*, ed. by Florence S. Boos (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2008).



work has been conducted by Simon Rennie in his database of poets on the Cotton Famine in 2017.<sup>10</sup> The online database of Kirstie Blair, Mike Sanders, Oliver Betts, Lauren Weiss and Iona Craig *Piston, Pen & Press*, was made available in 2018<sup>11</sup>. These have opened out the field to move beyond poets with exclusively political themes focusing on anthologising poems by mill and railway workers as well as miners. The focus of all of these databases has shifted from an inclusive as opposed to an exclusive type of approach. For example, despite the specificity of its topic, Rennie writes that about the challenges of collating the poetry for the project commenting that:

The project attempted to bring to public and scholarly attention something lost through a legacy of literary neglect common to many fields of labouring-class writing: first in the assumption that it does not exist, then in the dismissal of its perceived quality, or historical significance. In this case there was a further layer of inaccessibility in the poetry's dispersal across many newspapers, which served as a real logistical barrier.<sup>12</sup>

Rennie's comments are acute in their acknowledgement that 'perceived quality' or historical dismissal have retrospectively been used to disregard vast swathes of labouring-class writing. The most recent critical work on labouring-class poetics from the group of academics who created the *Piston, Pen & Press* website in the *Journal of Victorian Studies* in 2023, takes this focus on considering labouring-class poets on their own terms even further. In particular Michael Sanders and Kirstie Blair's roundtable discussion article acknowledges the 'long critical shadow' of Chartist Literature, explains that 'the

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Rennie, *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5)* (2017), <<https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk>> [accessed 18 November 2023]

<sup>11</sup> Kirstie Blair, Mike Sanders, Oliver Betts, Lauren Weiss and Iona Craig, *Piston, Pen & Press* (2018), <<https://www.pistonpenandpress.org>> [accessed 18 November 2023]

<sup>12</sup> Simon Rennie, '[Re]-forming Cotton Famine Poetry – Some Implications', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27 (2022), 153-59 (p. 153).

examination of working-class literature in the field of literary studies is still bedevilled by questions of aesthetic quality', and places a renewed focus on the 'day-to-day routines of working-class life' as opposed to what has been 'for understandable and laudable reasons, concentrated on 'political' writing'.<sup>13</sup>

A brief flare of interest in Harris's work from the Cornish poet, D.M. Thomas in the late 1970s focused on him as an object of local Cornish interest. Thomas published a selected works of Harris entitled *Songs from the Earth* with Lodenek Press: a regional press based in Padstow. Thomas's approach to presenting Harris to a twentieth century audience was to offer an extremely harsh pruning of his poetry. Primarily, Thomas takes issue with Harris's religious dogmatism (this is discussed in Chapter 3) although actually this was Harris's way of challenging people's conceptions about the moral qualities of miners and other labouring-class people. He presents Harris as the poet he wishes him to be as opposed to the poet he actually was. In Thomas's defence, he was trying to promote a poet whose nineteenth-century prolixity placed him at odds with the poetic fashions of the 1970s. This was an era where arts funding was being cut and modernism proved a pervasive influence on poetics. This failure to evaluate Harris on his own terms and relegate him to a kind of 'epigrammatic best of' collection of lines shows that Thomas appreciates some of Harris's formal ability but that the overarching effect of his poetry in full length is too bloated and verbose. In Chapter 3, the argument is made that this kind of approach devalues Harris by not viewing his work in context. Harris's approach was commensurate with the literary conventions of the nineteenth-century and its thematic and formal qualities need to be evaluated in this context.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Sanders and Kirstie Blair, 'Roundtable: Piston, Pen & Press', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 389–394 (pp. 390-91).

Harris's Cornish-centric appeal continued into the 1990s when Paul Newman (1945–2013) wrote a biography of Harris and published it with another small Cornish publishing house, Dyllansow Truran. This book is a composite of Harris's life story sourced from his own autobiography. It includes some secondary sources including literary periodicals which are used to enrich Harris's original autobiographical material. Newman also makes some tentative attempts at literary criticism. He is critical of what he calls the 'gaseous' poetic dramas in Harris's collected works observing that 'powerful and idiosyncratic writing is there but it is often robed in windy rhetoric.'<sup>14</sup> Although writing a decade later, Newman appears to be stuck in the same feedback loop as D.M. Thomas, unable to separate the conventions of nineteenth-century poetics which he perceives to be unpalatable to the average reader and unable to guide them to an appreciation of Harris in context.

It is only relatively recently that John Harris has received some very limited attention from scholars John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan as a poet on his own terms. This has been in the context of one academic paper published in 2013.<sup>15</sup> A substantial entry on his material achievements can be found in the *Laboring-Class Poets Online* database.<sup>16</sup> However, even this more sympathetic treatment of him fails to take into account the powerfully accomplished and idiosyncratic nature of his writing which is a combination of Augustan and Romantic influences infused with the concerns and values of the Victorian era. It is this hybridity that makes his writing distinctive during the era in which it was written and worthy of more critical attention than it has yet received. Chapter 5 suggests that a rigorous, analytical and evaluative scrutiny of Harris's corpus reveals a poet who mastered the literary conventions of the sixteenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. As Bridget

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<sup>14</sup> Newman, p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge, 'Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-Century Mineworker Poets', *Philological Quarterly*, (2013), 225-250.

<sup>16</sup> John Goodridge, 'Static Updates of the Database of Labouring-Class Poets', 2001, *Laboring-Class Poets Online* <<https://lcpoets.wordpress.com/category/history/>>, 1-268 (p. 101) [accessed 9th December 2023]

Keegan rightly observes, this imbues Harris with the hybridised voice of a labouring-class man using the conventions of middle-class literary taste to show his perceptions and feelings. However, Harris takes his approach to innovation further, synthesising eighteenth-century Romantic values of poetry as a tool for social change and synthesising them with the nineteenth-century belief in the affectivity of poetry to create something idiosyncratic that creates direct somatic effects on the reader.

The next section of this introduction outlines Harris's life and how this relates to the further arguments and discussions that will come later in this thesis. Throughout this thesis I will be arguing that Harris's life, his work, and his personal circumstances affected his poetry, the patronage he was able to receive, and what type of critical attention he received. With this in mind I will now provide a brief overview of his life.

### John Harris's life and corpus

John Harris was born in Bolenowe, near Camborne, Cornwall in 1820 at 'Six Chimneys' – a series of five cramped cottages notable for the extra chimney on the end one of them. Harris was born into poverty, and he describes his birthplace as a 'boulder-built cottage, with reedy roof, bare rafters, and clay floor'. He also explains that 'the rough house had no back door [...] The wood-work of the roof was all visible, and sometimes the stars through the thatch'.<sup>17</sup> Harris's father was a farmer and his mother was the daughter of a farmer and John was one of ten children. At the time of Harris's birth, Paul Newman describes Cornwall as 'one of the richest sources for tin and copper in the world. The prosperity was superficial, however. For the miners, the wages were meagre, twelve to fifteen shillings a week, and the trade suffered fluctuations of supply and demand.'<sup>18</sup> All of these factors

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<sup>17</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, p. 1.

combined to make an environment where conditions were poor; employers exploitative and opportunistic; survival was paramount and religion the only comfort.

Harris received some elementary schooling at several village schools where he excelled academically. Such was Harris's passion for writing verse and the insuperable poverty he faced that he described himself using blackberries for ink and tea parchments for paper amongst other improvised writing implements.<sup>19</sup> As a contemporary reader, it can be easy to admire this ingenuity in an era of easily available writing materials, but Harris's improvisations are a stark reminder of both his poverty, the almost insurmountable barriers he faced in becoming a poet as well as his sheer commitment to being one.

His formative ambitions for a solely poetic career were stalled when he went to work at the age of nine. Harris was removed from school by his parents and put to work in the fields with his Uncle George Harris. This was then followed by working with a tin streamer and then — at the age of ten — he began work at the local mine, Dolcoath. For two years he prepared and dressed copper ore and after this he began work underground with his father as a miner. It is hard to imagine the working conditions of a Victorian mine but Harris gives us a distinct impression:

Here [at Dolcoath mine] I laboured from morning till night, and often from night till morning, frequently in sulphur and dust almost to suffocation. Sometimes I stood in slime and water above my knees, and then in levels so badly ventilated that the very stones were hot [...] Sometimes I stood on a stage hung in ropes in the middle of a wide working, where my life depended on a single nail driven into a plank. Had the nail slipped, I should have been pitched headlong on the broken rocks more than twenty feet below [...] Sometimes I have been so exhausted as to

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<sup>19</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 29.

lie down and sleep on the sharp flints, and sometimes so thirsty that I have drunk stale water from the keg, closing my teeth to keep back the worms.<sup>20</sup>

Mining was not an occupation with a high life expectancy. Harris's poems are littered with tributes to colleagues who passed away underground. Many of them were killed as they tried to save their fellow workers; others were victims of mechanical failures and many expired due to the atrocious working conditions. Surprisingly, according to Harris much of this experience fuelled rather than negated his desire to write. It would seem that Harris's suffering underground only increased his urge to celebrate the world above it. His appreciation of the natural, organic world above ground was only heightened by his long days of arduous and perilous labour. This is something that is explored in Chapter 4 where Harris's relationship with the natural world is discussed. Harris's synthesis of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century as well as Victorian appropriations of Romantic value results in some powerfully idiosyncratic writing.

The combination of imminent death and the health conditions caused by prolonged periods of time spent underground meant that most miners did not live beyond their thirties.<sup>21</sup> Harris was lucky and escape from the mine came for him at a time when many of his peers had already perished. At the age of 37, he was encouraged to apply for the post of Bible Reader at Falmouth. Staunchly religious and an adherent to both Anglican and Methodist doctrines, Harris applied and was successful. It is likely that his previous experiences as an itinerant Methodist preacher and Sunday School teacher would have aided his application as well as the strongly religious flavour of much of his poetry. Up until his move to Falmouth, Harris had published two collections of poetry assisted by his patron, George Smith — a local industrialist. These were *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*

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<sup>20</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> Newman, p. 62.

(1853) which sold out its first impression and ran to second, expanded one in 1856. In 1857, Harris's move to Falmouth was succeeded by the publications of *Land's End, Kynance Cove and other poems* in 1858, *The Mountain Prophet, The Mine and other Poems* in 1860 and *A Story of Carn Brea* in 1863. Chapter 2 explores Harris's first and subsequent attempts at publication in this context, establishing that before his escape from the world of mining any criticism of the established ideologies of the Victorian era were explicit but, after his move to Falmouth, he is able to garner support that allows him to much more openly promote his more divergent political sentiments such as his abhorrence of war.

*Land's End, Kynance Cove and other poems* was followed in 1863 by *A Story of Carn Brea. Essays and Poems*. This is considered by many of Harris's latter critics such as D.M. Thomas to be one of his finest pieces of work. The titular poem in the collection is constructed using a 'Chinese box' style narrative where two riders lost in a storm arrive at a widow's house and exchange stories focusing on nature, praise of God, country communities and of course the 'mountain' that is Carn Brea. Harris received much praise for *A Story of Carn Brea* that went far beyond Cornwall and the Methodist ministers who had initially encouraged him.

Harris's greatest literary achievement came in 1864 when he won The Shakespeare Tercentenary prize. This was a poetry competition organised by Coventry Town Council and held in Stratford-upon-Avon. The beginning of Chapter 5 explores this in more detail commenting there were over a hundred anonymised entries for this competition which were judged by a literary panel. Harris's winning of the first prize, which was a gold watch engraved with a line from *Macbeth*, showed the quality of his work when it was viewed without the limiting sobriquet of 'labouring-class poet'.

Harris's success with the Shakespeare prize was followed by a trip to Stratford-upon-Avon itself taking in Bristol, Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester, Malvern, and Birmingham. As this was the first time that Harris had travelled beyond Cornwall, he was inspired to write a spate of poems and the collection *Shakspeare's Shrine* followed in 1866. This was quickly followed by *Luda: A Lay of the Druids* in 1868. *Luda* is perhaps one of the more unusual poems in Harris's corpus dealing with a Palmer who witnesses 'barbaric' Druidic rights and then helps fend off an invasion — all of which is set around Harris's favoured location of Carn Brea and its 'castle'. It is perhaps typical of Harris's romantic and imaginative qualities that the old hunting fort that can be found on top of Carn Brea is converted to a 'fortress' and forms the background to an epic battle between two warring tribes.<sup>22</sup> 'Luda' was inspired by the writings of the antiquarian William Borlase, who thought he found evidence of druid sacrifice on the rocks at the top of Carn Brea. Chapter 4 explores these Romantic qualities in Harris's work noting how he appropriates ideas of landscape to reflect the direct influences of eighteenth-century notions of industrialisation on his corpus, much of which contradicted the nineteenth-century's delight in industrial development, urban migration and economic growth. This thematic idiosyncrasy is considered in detail to highlight the qualities in Harris's work that distinguish him from his peers.

Harris released *Bulo* in 1871. This contained some stories inspired by Australia and some pieces of local antiquarian interest. This collection was quickly followed in 1872 by a selection called *Cruise of the Cutter*. This was a collection of peace poems dedicated to Baroness Burdett Coutts who was a faithful subscriber to his work and included such notable authors as Charles Dickens as her acquaintances. It is interesting to note the increasing regularity with which Harris publishes work when he moves to Falmouth. Much of this is due to his occupation of Scripture reader being more conducive to the writing of poetry.

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<sup>22</sup> John Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1868), p. 4.



However, it is also noteworthy that the proselytizing side of Harris — the one that advocates peace, praises God and censures drink, immorality and war — is much to the forefront in these collections. As his work matures, the young man who saw an ecstatic vision of God in the natural world is relegated to a lesser voice. Harris's move to Falmouth allowed him to mix with a different type of patron who allowed him to share his political ideas more freely, many of which were not in direct correlation with the ideas of the time.

Harris received a grant of fifty pounds from the Royal Literary Fund in 1872 and it was likely that this fund was used by him to take stock of his legacy and publish what would become his closest thing to a collected poems.<sup>23</sup>

Harris followed up his collected works so far with a slim volume on flora entitled *Walks with the Wild Flowers* in 1875. This was an alphabetically ordered sequence of short poems on flowers, such as the bluebell and the daffodil. *The Two Giants* followed in 1878. This volume took Harris's dislike for war and alcoholism to new extremes personifying them both as two overgrown monsters who destroy the world; this is a further indication of the new politically oriented nature his writing took after his move to Falmouth.

In 1879, Harris received a further two grants: one £50 per annum from the Royal Literary Fund and a one-off grant of £200 from the Royal Bounty Fund in April, 1877. It was shortly after this in 1879 that Harris produced *Monro*. The poem in this eponymous collection is a thinly disguised autobiographical treatment of Harris's life dealing with his early years as a miner, the beauty of Cornwall, and other themes consistent with Harris's work. Written in Spenserian stanzas, *Monro* could certainly be seen as one of Harris's more technically accomplished pieces.

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<sup>23</sup> London, British Library, MS John Harris Application Form, 18 Oct 1872. Loan 96 RLF 1/1900/1.

Harris was elected a fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1879 and produced another collection of poems, *Linto and Laneer*, as well as his own autobiography in 1882. The autobiography focused mainly on four key areas: Harris's early life; his experiences as a miner; home comforts and book making.

On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1884, Harris passed away in the company of his son and wife. Religious to the end, his last words were reported as being 'Lord! Lord!'. Harris was interred next to his daughter Lucretia in Treslothan churchyard near his birthplace of Bolenowe. After his death, his son issued Harris's final posthumous collection, 'Last Lays' in 1884.

There are three factors that make John Harris remarkable. His production of poetry in straitened conditions; the fact that he was able to publish fifteen volumes of his work throughout his lifetime and his winning of a national literary prize. Despite this, Harris has received barely any critical attention to the present day. The intention of this thesis is to investigate the reasons for this lack of critical focus and establish why Harris is a significant Victorian poet. The next section outlines the focus of each of my five chapters.

### Chapter descriptions

This thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter one uses John Harris's autobiography to retrospectively consider how he was able to use the medium of life writing to represent himself as a person worthy of support and patronage from his social superiors. The first section of the chapter considers the declining authority of the church and the increasing power of imaginative literature in the nineteenth

century commonly referred to as the ‘cult of literature’.<sup>24</sup> This section explains the decline of the Bible’s influence in the nineteenth century and its functional replacement with other types of creative writing. This contextualises the second part of the chapter which is an exploration of the rise of the popularity of biography as a literary form in the nineteenth century. This section argues that this is attributable to its role in cementing Victorian society’s perception of itself as a great era. All of the individual life stories which made up a constituent part of it were naturally worthy of commemoration. The third section takes these ideas and focuses on John Harris’s own biographical entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. It examines the more reductive and simplistic ways that labouring-class writers were written about compared with their social superiors when it came to commemorating this era. The emergence of autobiography is examined in the fourth section alongside the tension between the inward looking aspects of a form of writing in an era whose self-perception was outward looking as opposed to individualistic. This segues into Harris’s own autobiography which is examined in the fifth section where the relationship between patronage, content, and literary style is explored. I argue that Harris’s conservative ideologies of conformity and hard work lie behind his social superiors’ encouragement of him to write his autobiography. The chapter draws to a close with an analysis of the vagaries of literary fashion, arguing that the conformist aspects of Harris that facilitated his publication in the nineteenth century relegated him to obscurity as time and tastes moved on leading to accusations of pretension in terms of his writing style. Overall, this chapter uses an historicist perspective in conjunction with a close examination of Harris’s life writing to establish the reasons for his period of popularity and literary appreciation, then subsequent decline and relegation to literary obscurity.

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<sup>24</sup> William R. McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 2.

The support Harris received from his social superiors and organisations such as the Royal Literary Fund and the Royal Bounty Fund are then investigated in chapter 2. Chapter 2 looks at a different aspect of Harris's popularity as it surveys the varying forms of patronage John Harris received. The chapter shows that this patronage ranged from individuals with wealth and social standing who sponsored him when his writing was in its infancy to the literary institutions and prominent individuals that provided support to him as he attempted to maintain and develop his literary career. I argue that Harris's patrons, whether individuals or organisations, demanded that their own values, and an echo of their moral stance, be made both implicit and explicit throughout his work, showing that this was a prerequisite before financially aiding publication. The first section begins by exploring the shared backgrounds of Harris and his first mentor, Dr George Smith. Smith's reasons for supporting Harris are evaluated in the context of their shared labouring-class origins. Harris's patronage in the context of the Victorian era is then explored in the second section. The processes of patronage are explained as well as the useful role submissive labouring-class writers played in reproducing the dominant values of the Victorian era for industrialists who wished to make a profit. The next part uses primary evidence of Harris's successful applications to the Royal Literary Fund to explain how he was able to use his existing publications as well as an emphasis on his straitened financial circumstances to receive further financial support. The chapter concludes with an exploration of Harris's politics, showing how his pacifism and support of the regeneration of mining land led to Lord Beaconsfield and Mr Gladstone undertaking the process of securing him significant sums from the Royal Bounty Fund. By the close of this chapter, it is evident that all the patronage and support Harris received as a labouring-class writer was dependent on his writing's reiteration of the ideologies or political opinions of those who were sponsoring him. A skein develops where there is, at least, a surface level of conformity between the content of Harris's poetry and the viewpoint of his patrons.

Chapter 3 begins to explore notions of literary merit and distinction in labouring-class poetry. It tracks how contemporaneous literary criticism of labouring-class poets from their peers distinguished itself by viewing their work as curiosity and that more recent academic criticism has tended to focus on trying to promote labouring-class poets due to their reactionary political content, use of regional dialect or proto-modernist stylings. Chapter 3 also moves the perspective out somewhat and examines the field of labouring-class poetics and academic criticism from a chronological viewpoint. Harris is compared with other labouring-class poets who have been the subject of critical investigation to consider the judgements and criteria that have been used to retrospectively criticise labouring-class poets. The first section begins by considering how labouring-class poets were perceived by their literary peers in the nineteenth century before moving forward into the latter half of the twentieth century where labouring-class poetics becomes a discrete topic of academic study. During this period, a divide opens up between the large majority of labouring-class writers, such as John Harris, who subscribed to the literary conventions of the nineteenth century and those who opt for a more radicalised and politically informed approach, such as Gerald Massey, Samuel Bamford, Joseph Skipsey, and Ebenezer Elliot. The chapter argues that throughout the 1970s and 1980s critics such as Martha Vicinus privileged politicised poets as the focus of academic study. This changed during the 1990s when Brian Maidment acknowledged that the vast majority of labouring-class poetry had been overlooked. In the 'Parnassian' section of his collection of labouring-class poetry, *The Poorhouse Fugitives*, Maidment suggested that he had attempted to identify labouring-class writers, who despite his or her formal conservatism, offered up a poetry that somehow 'offered more than weak copies of anachronistic poems great poems from within the British tradition' and that represented a 'conscious cultural attempt to join in literary discourse at the highest possible level, to have a voice, on all equal terms with all others, in

the cultural and philosophical debates of the time'.<sup>25</sup> Examples of poets included the collier, Joseph Skipsey, who is evaluated in relation to Harris in Chapter 3. The plausibility of this approach is explored during this chapter. After the year 2000, academics like John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan, Kirstie Blair, Florence S. Boos, Simon Rennie, Mike Sanders, Oliver Betts and Lauren Weiss move criticism towards a more inclusive and nuanced approach to labouring-class poetics in books of academic criticism and the construction of online databases. These critics begin to consider arguments around the imitativeness of labouring-class poets and explore notions of hybridisation. This shift in criticism leads to the evaluation of more formally conservative poets on their own terms to evaluate the impact of their writing. The purpose of this chapter is to explore Harris's corpus using these academic trends to understand why his work has been ignored by the vast majority of academics. The conclusion is reached that labouring-class poets such as Harris who mastered the established literary forms of the nineteenth century were not privileged by the majority of critics in the last half of the twentieth century due to their perceived lack of formal innovation but that the field is now more conducive to exploring Harris's abilities as a poet.

Chapter 4 argues that Harris's corpus is indeed written in a hybrid discourse. His idiosyncratic fusing of eighteenth-century Romanticism's belief in the power of poetry to elevate mankind with the nineteenth century appropriations of the form to illustrate precepts is evaluated. It is established that Harris's corpus is an idiosyncratic melange of Romantic ideologies and nineteenth-century poetic values. Because of this, Chapter 4 focuses on reclaiming John Harris's place in the critical discourse of Victorian poetics. This chapter examines Harris's view of nature and everyday life and relates it to an older, Romantic aesthetic. It argues that Harris was influenced by the Romantics in a way that

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Maidment, 'Introduction', in *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught poets and poetry in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Brian Maidment (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987; repr. 1992), pp. 13-19 (p. 15).

was unusual for a Victorian poet. In this chapter, I briefly consider whether it is possible to classify Harris as a Romantic poet in the light of the Victorian's era simultaneous rejection and appropriation of Romanticism and the influence of eighteenth-century neo-classical forms of poetry on Harris's corpus. These observations then segue into a discussion about the changing definitions of Romanticism since the eighteenth century. Harris's corpus is investigated to delineate and explore its Romantic aspects in the light of contemporary scholarship. The legacy and influence of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth-century on Harris are then explored alongside how the Victorians' appropriation of their work was also an additional influence on Harris's corpus. It is argued that the revolutionary aspects of Romanticism made a significant impact on Harris's normally politically conservative poetry. The chapter then moves onto an exploration of Harris's use of the gothic in his writing alongside the influences the Romantics had on his self-perception as a poet in the bardic tradition. This chapter concludes with the argument that the synthesis of direct influence from the Romantics combined with the Victorian appropriations of their work have led to Harris producing some powerfully idiosyncratic writing.

Chapter 5 looks at Harris's hybridisation from a formal perspective, arguing that in an era where metrical diversity and investigation were prevalent, Harris was both a master and innovator with form. This chapter moves to an analysis of the context of prosody in the nineteenth century. It is established that in an era where metrical schemes were abundant and that the political nature of metre and its affectivity were recurring themes in its critical discourse, Harris was both a master and innovator with form. The chapter concludes by offering a close reading of Harris's dramatic fragment, *Caleb Cliff* to illustrate Harris's skilful and original use of metre. Chapter 5 concludes that Harris is able to synthesise the sense enforcing belief of poetry in the nineteenth century alongside other previous uses of metre to connote characterisation to potentially achieve a direct and kinetic impact on his readership.

Overall, this thesis argues that John Harris is an overlooked Victorian poet. Having established the critically paradoxical situation in which labouring-class poets have been critically evaluated from the eighteenth century to the present day, it explains that if mastery of established literary forms followed by innovation is the mark of a poet who needs further critical investigation then John Harris has been ignored for too long.



## Chapter 1: Autobiography as construct: performativity and popularity

John Harris's main period of popularity and literary acclaim coincided with the Victorian era's increased print production, improving literacy rates and the corresponding public demand for printed matter. In line with the Victorian period's sense of its own progressiveness, biography was on the ascendant. The advent of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885) celebrated both major and minor writers of this great age and, in a shift from the conventions of the eighteenth century, poets and novelists of this period were also beginning to produce autobiographical writing to commemorate the era in which their lives played a part. Wayne Shumaker cites examples of nineteenth-century authors who produced life writing as including Coleridge's letters to Poole, Byron, Scott, Hogg, Moore, Hunt, De Quincey, Newman, Mill, Ruskin, Martineau, Huxley, Darwin, and Trollope.<sup>26</sup>

Due to his own literary aspirations and the established conventions of the era, Harris published his own life history, entitled *My Autobiography*, in 1882. This chapter uses Harris's autobiographical writing to consider the factors that contributed towards his popularity during his lifetime. It also explains how these same qualities inform the lack of interest that attended Harris's work after his death. I will argue that this popularity is attributable to Harris's use of the subscription model of publication, which was facilitated by his middle-class mentors who believed that he was an excellent non-radical role model for his labouring-class peers. Harris's desire for publication also meant that there was a performative quality to his writing where he both presented himself as a humble product of the society that spawned him and encouraged his peers to appease their employers and social superiors with an almost cringing gratitude. This chapter argues that it is this performativity that served Harris so well in his lifetime that brought about his decline. This

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<sup>26</sup> Wayne Shumaker, *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Form* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 28-29.

chapter uses an historicist perspective in conjunction with a close examination of Harris's life writing to establish the reasons for his period of popularity and literary appreciation, then subsequent decline and relegation to literary obscurity.

### From religion to individualism

In 2007, William McKelvy observed that our contemporary notion of imaginative writing as literature developed primarily in the late nineteenth century. He comments that most studies of nineteenth-century book production,

indicate that the religious market for books exceeded or closely rivaled the literary market throughout the 1850s. Add to this general picture the market for Bibles, New Testaments, Prayer Books, hymnbooks, sermons, short religious tracts, and religious periodicals, and one can plausibly claim that religion — not some post-theological literary sphere — was the single largest paradigm for print into the 1870s. It was only in the 1880s and after that the religious market for books became a specialty market outsized by the publisher's category of "Literature."<sup>27</sup>

As McKelvy makes clear, the religious market for literature had transferred to an imaginative one at the end of the nineteenth century. This had its antecedents in what is termed the 'cult of literature' in the early nineteenth century, a term used by Oscar Wilde in 1897 but its origins can be found much earlier in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> McKelvy cites Thomas Carlyle's 1820s observation that 'Literature was but a branch of religion' and that 'Literary men' made up a 'perpetual priesthood'.<sup>29</sup> McKelvy says that this significant literary movement was identified as 'a claim made repeatedly in nineteenth-century

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<sup>27</sup> McKelvy, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> McKelvy, p. 1.

Britain: Literature was becoming modernity's functional religion, and the author, with the power to sanctify human experience and redeem national life, had assumed a sacred vocation.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that literature was serving the dogmatic function of religion and replacing the Bible for the reading populace when it came to matters of social and moral conduct. A cursory glance at Harris's debut poetry collection, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (1856) confirms McKelvy's observation that religious and literary work often co-existed in one collection. In Harris's case this took the form of poetry inspired by religious events or principles. Titles of poems in this collection include 'Christian Heroism', 'The Brasen Serpent', 'The Birth of Christ', 'Telling Me of God', 'The World for Christ!', 'The Child's First Prayer', 'The Sabbath' and 'The Mother Preaching Christ'.<sup>31</sup> It is important to acknowledge that these are merely the poems with explicitly religious titles. Whatever their topic, nearly all of Harris's poems divert themselves into religious precepts. An example of this would be the seemingly non-religious poem, 'The Strange Division of Worldly Wealth' which describes an aged man who is poor but made rich in his affection for God. Harris concludes the poem with the lines:

Riches God values not,  
Though we in wealth may roll :  
A higher, holier principle  
Within the humble soul  
Is only prized by Him<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> John Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1856), pp. ix-xi.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

The title of this poem might have led the reader to presuming they were about to read some proto-socialistic diatribe about the increasingly enterprising and affluent Victorian middle classes. Instead, Harris concludes with the religious precept that God does not value wealth. Harris's initial description of the man in this poem is literary in its stylings. The man is described walking by a 'singing brook' and owning a 'pastoral crook' showing the synthesis between literary and religious themes that was embodied in much literary work in the 1850s. This has the advantage of allowing Harris to appeal to both religious and literary markets with his writing.

One of the underlying causes of literature becoming a functional religion during this period was the declining power of the Anglican Church. According to W.R. Ward, the religious dissent spearheaded by the political theorist, clergyman, and theologian Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) in the eighteenth century caused a rift between those who refused to subscribe to a literal interpretation of religious doctrine and those who did. The ensuing debates and rifts caused by the dissenters caused a fragmentation and diminishing of the Church of England's power.<sup>33</sup> Due to improving levels of literacy, people were beginning to think more independently and, less influenced by religious doctrine, had started to look elsewhere for instruction and reflection. Novels provided the middle classes with an opportunity to reflect on their own lives due to their relatable characters and themes. These were easier to engage with than the aphoristic abstractions of the Bible as well as being far more liberating. Terry Eagleton observes that,

If [the novel] is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint. In a world in which God is dead, everything, so Dostoevsky remarked, is

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<sup>33</sup> W.R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England: 1790-1850* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1972), pp. 27-29.

permitted; and the same goes for a world in which the old autocratic order is dead and the middle class reigns triumphant.<sup>34</sup>

Novel reading was hugely liberating for the aspirant middle classes enabling them to imagine a more liberated future than those offered by the instructional constraints of the Bible. The Victorian era's transition in both the definition of and market for literature was coupled with huge increases in potential readership during this time. Ian Watt clarifies that the reading public had begun to increase in the eighteenth century but that this was still limited:

Many eighteenth-century observers thought that their age was one of remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading. On the other hand, it is probable that although the reading public was large by comparison with previous periods, it was still very far from the mass reading public of today [...] The only contemporary estimate of the size of the reading public was made very late in the century: Burke estimated it at 80,000 in the nineties.<sup>35</sup>

Richard D. Altick explains that over the course of the nineteenth century the population of England and Wales doubled from 8.9 to 17.9 million and that the population of Scotland, which formed an important market for English books and periodicals, increased from 2.09 million in 1821 to 4.5 million in 1901.<sup>36</sup> This, of course, resulted in a larger reading public able to potentially engage with an increased amount of printed matter than had been the case in the previous century. Literacy rates were also on the rise after the Educational

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<sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Pimlico, 1957; repr. 2000), pp. 35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd edn (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 81.

Reform Act of 1832. Matthew Taunton provides some specific data to show the increasing of growth of readers:

After the Reform Bill of 1832, access to schooling was progressively expanded for the working classes. These efforts were consolidated in 1870 with the passage of the Forster Act, which dictated that government was ultimately responsible for providing elementary education to those who could not otherwise access it. Census data can scarcely tell us much about the nature or quality of the population's encounters with the printed word, but they nevertheless show a rise in male literacy from 69.3 per cent in 1851 to 97.2 per cent in 1900, and an even more striking growth in female literacy, from 54.8 per cent to 96.8 per cent over the same period. By the end of the century, almost everyone was potentially a reader of print.<sup>37</sup>

These increases in literacy rates are significant and a marked contrast with the more minor increase in readership that occurred during the eighteenth century. Taking Taunton's figure of a 69% rate of male literacy and applying it to Altick's figure of 18 million in England and Wales yields a figure of 12 and a half million potential readers compared with the 80,000 cited by Watt in the late eighteenth century. Although these figures do not specify levels of literacy or the amount of reading that took place per person, they do give an indication that there was an expanding body of people capable of accessing the written word. A market had been created and the developments in mass print production meant it was able to be accommodated effectively. Harris himself discusses his passion for laying his hands on any printed matter that he could in his autobiographical book, *My Autobiography* (1882):

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Taunton, 'Victorian Print Culture', *Brewminate: A Bold Blend of News and Ideas*, (2019), <<https://brewminate.com/victorian-print-culture>> [accessed 24 December 2023] ('Literacy', para. 2 of 2)

Then came my first journey down the hill to Dame Trezona's school in the hamlet of Bolenowe under the trees, where I sat upon a low cricket at her feet to learn the A B C. She had some half-a-dozen boys and girls in all ; and I was soon considered to be the best scholar in her establishment [...] I made fair proficiency in all the scholastic arts she could inculcate, and soon became very fond of books.<sup>38</sup>

Harris's anecdote confirms that he experienced a degree of education which helped to develop his passion for the written word. The fact that he was able to become 'very fond of books' was due to the increasing production of printed matter in this era to cater for the tastes of an increasingly literate population.

The printing press was invented in Germany by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440 and brought to England by William Caxton in the 1470s. Printing had remained fundamentally the same up until the end of the eighteenth century, requiring two men to operate a wooden screw press, which produced 200 impressions an hour. The nineteenth century saw in a mechanised and significantly faster process. By 1814, *The Times* was being printed on the Koenig-Bauer high speed press. which could produce over a thousand sheets per hour.<sup>39</sup>

This huge expansion in the production of print media was not just to serve a small intellectual and monied elite but was instead targeted at the wider and more diverse readership that increased literacy rates had created. Linda K. Hughes notes the nineteenth-century general reading public's expanding and diverse appetite for printed media, irrespective of social background:

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<sup>38</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Taunton, 'Production', paras. 1-2 of 3.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* sold 60,000 copies in three to four years and *Enoch Arden* 40,000 copies in mere weeks. [...] *Cornhill Magazine*, in which poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, and the Brontës appeared, attained a circulation approaching 100,000 with its first issue. And cheap papers aimed at working and lower middle classes, like the *Family Herald* or *London Journal*, also published original poetry and sold between 300,000 and 450,000 copies per issue in the 1850s.<sup>40</sup>

Hughes confirms that the range of printed material being consumed in the Victorian age was extensive and wide ranging. Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate (1850–1892), sold in large quantities and newspapers aimed at a labouring-class readership were selling just under half a million copies a week.<sup>41</sup> Harris was also able to experience his own modest levels of success. His debut collection of poetry, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (1853) sold out its first print run and was re-issued with additional poems in 1856. In his 'Preface to the Second Edition', Harris acknowledges 'the kind reception with which his little book has met, induces the author to publish this second edition, revised, corrected, and very much enlarged.'<sup>42</sup> The fact that Harris was able to sell the complete print run of his first collection and then publish an enlarged edition also reinforces that during the Victorian period, demand for print was not just limited to established and distinguished authors with a literary reputation such as Tennyson.

It is evident that the rising levels of literacy in the nineteenth century combined with improved levels of print production to create an increased and diverse readership for the printed word. The rising popularity of the novel was matched by an increasingly diverse

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<sup>40</sup> Linda K. Hughes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, p. vii.



readership who also wished to engage with other forms such as current events and life writing.

### The Dictionary of National Biography

Biographical writing was consistently used by the Victorians to reflect upon, and explore the progressiveness of the era in which they lived. Alison Booth explains that ‘the British in the nineteenth century proliferated collections of memorial tributes to enhance a national heritage.’<sup>43</sup> Victorian biographical writing was used to commemorate and celebrate the significant achievements and advancements of the era. Writings about the achievements of significant men who were progressive added to the era’s perception of itself.

The *Dictionary of National Biography* first appeared on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1885. Juliette Atkinson explains that the *Dictionary of National Biography* was an attempt to mimic other national biographical collections that were published elsewhere in Europe such as the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (1875) and *Nouvelle Biographie Universelle* (1852–1886).<sup>44</sup> It was conceptualised as a universal biography that would feature key figures from world history. Initially, Leslie Stephen was assigned to the role of the co-editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and therefore he was responsible for deciding who to include in such an ambitious project. As Stephen was ‘born into the Clapham Sect, a social elite descended from important eighteenth-century Evangelical and Quaker families that included the Wilberforces and the Thorntons’, it is easy to identify how his social background played a role in his choices.<sup>45</sup> Atkinson provides further detail when summarising the criteria for

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<sup>43</sup> Alison Booth, ‘Men and Women of the Time: Victorian Prosopographies’, in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. by David Amigoni (Aldergate: Ashgate, 2006; repr. 2017), pp. 41-66 (p. 41).

<sup>44</sup> Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Autobiography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth Century Hidden Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 231.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

inclusion in a project of writing biographies of significant or interesting lives. Potentially the scope was limitless:

*The Dictionary of National Biography* (1885–1901), which emerged in this context, shared the difficulties of these projects concerning the selection of appropriate subjects. Bravely, its editors set out to combine both criteria of inclusion: eminence *and* humble worth.<sup>46</sup>

The context and projects Atkinson refers to is the parallel development of the *New English Dictionary* (1884–1928) which was also struggling to establish a policy of inclusion.

Atkinson's comment that the editors of the *Dictionary of the National Biography* sought to 'combine both criteria and inclusion' suggests that the criteria had specific universal standards which promoted the exclusion of certain individuals. This was then directly contradicted by the idea of 'inclusion' which implied a more subjective and less rigid approach. Atkinson's descriptors of 'eminence' and 'humble worth' suggest a meritocratic inclusion of individuals from a variety of social backgrounds who were able to contribute positively to Victorian society's perception of itself.

It seems clear that Stephen's social background informed his inclusive approach to the selection criteria for the project. Stephen is explicit about his commitment to inclusion, albeit in terms of a kind of inverted snobbery. He says:

it is the second-rate people; the people whose lives have to be re-constructed from obituary notices, or from references in memoirs and collections of letters;...or

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

sometimes painfully dug out of collections of manuscripts, and who really become generally accessible through the dictionary alone.<sup>47</sup>

Stephen's notion of 'second-rate people' connect to illustrate the class-based dynamic that informed inclusion in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. As an established member of the upper middle class, Stephen felt able to take an interest in people from lower social backgrounds. Some of the phraseology used by Stephen implies that the *process* of uncovering these second-rate people was far superior to anything that may have actually *occurred* in their lives. Whether or not he was conscious of it, Stephen was reinforcing a paradigm where middle-class values of scholarship and research were being privileged over the biographical events of the lives of these 'second-rate people'. The word 'painfully' emphasises the time and painstaking approach required for this task. It also serves to reinforce the fact that it was only something viable for people who had enough wealth to devote their leisure time to this task. For a person of a modest background to be included in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, they had to evidence an appropriate amount of humble worth to the editor.

John Harris was deemed to have been worthy of inclusion and the following citation is the complete entry:

HARRIS, JOHN (1820–1884), poet, eldest son of John Harris, miner and farmer, who died 23 April 1848, by his wife Christianna Smith, was born at Six Chimneys Cottage, Bolennowe Hill, Camborne, Cornwall, 14 Oct. 1820. The only education he received was at some small local schools; at nine years of age he worked on a farm with an uncle, and was next employed in tin streaming. When aged ten he was engaged at Dolcoath mine, near Camborne, dressing copper ore. In his leisure time

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 222-23.

he managed to improve his education, and commenced making verses. At the age of twelve he went underground in Dolcoath mine with his father. A dirge by him on the death of some men who were killed in Cam Brea mine was printed and sung by a blind man in the streets of Camborne. Hugh Rogers, rector of Camborne, and others lent him books, by which he gradually acquired a knowledge of English poetic literature. In 1844 he had become a 'tributor' in Dolcoath mine, and managed to save 200*l.*, with a portion of which he built a house with his own hands in his spare time. [...] Besides the works named Harris wrote: 'The Land's End and other Poems,' 1859; 'The Mountain Prophet,' 1860; 'A Story of Carn Brea,' 1863; 'Shakspeare's Shrine,' 1866; 'Luda, a Lay of the Druids,' 1868; 'Bulo, Reuben Ross,' &c., 1871; 'Wayside Pictures,' 1874; 'Walks with the Wild Flowers,' 1875; 'Tales and other Poems,' 1877; 'The Two Giants,' 1878; 'Monro,' 1879; and 'My Autobiography,' 1882. He also wrote twenty-four tracts entitled 'Peace Pages for the People,' contributed to 'The Band of Hope,' 'The Family Friend,' and other periodicals, or for the Leominster Tract Association and the Religious Tract Society.<sup>48</sup>

The entry begins by establishing John Harris's labouring-class credentials and to reinforce the lack of advantages Harris experienced. The second sentence features the adjective 'only' which emphasises his limited education. This is further reinforced by the diminutive 'small' to describe the schools he attended and reinforce the lack of education they provided. Harris's status as a labouring man is declared by describing his formative employment in agriculture and mining. All of these disadvantages are then juxtaposed with comments on Harris's self-improving qualities with the writer observing that in 'his leisure time he managed to improve his education, and commenced making verse' and 'gradually

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<sup>48</sup> *The Dictionary of National Biography Vol XXV Harris—Henry I.*, ed. by Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, p. 16.

acquired a knowledge of English poetic literature'. This shows Harris's dedication to slowly elevating himself and his industrious nature. This information is followed by a list of Harris's material achievements commenting on the '200l' he managed to save. This implies that his poetry writing endeavours did not come at the expense of being a responsible member of the Victorian society who was able to look after himself and his dependents. The dated editions of Harris's poetry books confirm his commitment to poetry by celebrating the amount of work he produced. However, it also avoids any literary criticism of Harris's work due to the fact that he is not an established literary figure. Instead, the author prefers to focus on the moral purpose of Harris's work identifying his contributions to 'The Band of Hope' who were a temperance movement for young people. All of these facts commemorate Harris as a worthy, industrious working man who made a positive contribution to society, especially those who were disadvantaged. This biographical focus on the public nature of Harris's achievement is commensurate with the nature of a Victorian society which looks for examples from every aspect of society to reinforce and celebrate its progressive attitudes.

Harris's entry reveals the information *The Dictionary of National Biography* chose to present to the reading public. There is no critical engagement with his corpus, just a biographical fragment that implicitly states Harris's worth lies in what he has achieved in the context of his circumstances. This places him outside the boundaries of literary criticism as to engage with him as a poet would mean that labouring-class men were the intellectual equals of their social superiors. Other *Dictionary of National Biography* entries on more established literary figures of the era focus far more closely on the formal qualities on the work itself. For example, a *Dictionary of National Biography* entry offered the following literary criticism of Tennyson's *Poems chiefly Lyrical*,

If the poems exhibit here and there on their descriptive side a lush and florid word-painting unchastened by that perfect taste that was yet to come, there is no less clearly discernible a width of outlook, a depth of spiritual feeling, as well as a lyric versatility, which from the outset distinguished the new-comer from Keats.<sup>49</sup>

The ‘depth of feeling’ and ‘lyric versatility’ alluded to in this entry are in marked contrast with the comments on Harris’s poetic output. As a labouring man, Harris has produced ‘works’ whereas Tennyson has produced ‘lush and florid word-painting’. ‘Works’ has industrial connotations whereas ‘lush’ and ‘florid’ connote a sense of excess redolent of both wealth and leisure time.

Harris’s value as an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is his triumphing over circumstances. His work ethic, self-sufficiency, and desire for self-improvement are all representative of the core values of the Victorian era and are emphasised in the entry. His biographer is then able to link these attitudes with his material achievements. As a labouring-class man and, presumably, ‘a second-rate life’, his real worth can only lie in reflecting the society that made him.<sup>50</sup>

As we have seen, the *Dictionary of National Biography* can serve to frame some of the era’s attitudes towards class, merit, and inclusion of biographical subjects. It also establishes the dynamic that existed in a publication that purported to be meritocratic and egalitarian in its inclusion of eminent and humble lives. A change in focus from the biographical to the autobiographical in the Victorian era only makes these dynamics more explicit. Although John Harris was not directly responsible for the construction of his biographical entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he was certainly aware of the

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<sup>49</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography Vol LVI Teach—Tollet*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, and & Co., 1898), p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> Atkinson, p. 222.

importance of using the form of autobiography to construct a message that was representing himself appropriately as a positive role model who was a product of the progressive and dynamic Victorian society, and it is here that we now turn.

### The changing role of autobiography

It is clear that that there was an increase in biographical writing in the Victorian era, culminating in the ambitious *Dictionary of National Biography*. The commemorative function and celebratory function of this genre was also accompanied by the development of autobiographical writing. Literary autobiographies were also more ubiquitous in this era than the one that preceded it. Wayne Shumaker provides the specifics in his wide-ranging study of autobiography:

Among eighteenth-century authors the autobiographical lacunae are striking. We have no autobiography by Defoe, Pope, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Hartley, Gay, Chesterfield, Berkeley, Goldsmith, Thomson, Gray, Collins, Macpherson, Burke, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Mackenzie, Priestley or Paine [...] In the nineteenth century the convention had changed. Coleridge (in the letters to Poole), Byron, Scott, Hogg, Moore, Hunt, De Quincey, Newman, Mill, Ruskin, Martineau, Huxley, Darwin, and Trollope—persons of comparable literary reputation—all wrote autobiographies.<sup>51</sup>

There are several contextual factors that may explain this increase in autobiographical writing from Victorian literary figures. Setting the surge in print media and consumption aside, the rise of autobiography in the Victorian era can also be attributed to the period's need to serve both outward- and inward-looking functions for society and the individual

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<sup>51</sup> Shumaker, pp. 28-29.

respectively. Robin Gilmour observes that the principal role of autobiography in the Victorian era was a subsuming of the private self to the public sphere.<sup>52</sup> This meant that individuals used autobiography to write themselves into the history of the era portraying themselves as a constituent component of its achievements. Historical events confirm that, although Gilmour's argument is correct in terms of the autobiographical impulse, the relationship between society and the individual was debated. In 1840, Thomas Carlyle observed that great individuals were responsible for society's achievements, commenting that 'for, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.'<sup>53</sup> This thinking was challenged by the sociologist Herbert Spencer's rebuttal of Carlyle's view. Spencer was a social Darwinist who believed that men's ability to greatness was essentially predetermined by their biological antecedents. From a class-based perspective, this suggested people who accumulated wealth, privilege, and status deserved these outcomes as it was a natural response to their physical or mental attributes that distinguished them from others. Spencer's observation that 'you must admit that the genesis of the great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown' shows that he believed great men were naturally evolved from the 'social state' that they had emerged from.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, he believed that although these men may have been destined for success from their biological attributes, the nature of their achievements was still representative of the social state in which they emerged.

The debate between Carlyle and Spencer is indicative of the era's desire for an assimilative relationship between the individual and society. Spencer's views connect biological

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<sup>52</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: John Wiley, 1859), p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*. (New York: Appleton, 1874), pp. 34-35.



adaptability with an individual's material achievements. It is also possible that, in an era where technological advancements were significant, life writing was a potential tool for the Victorians to understand their relationship with a rapidly evolving and developing society.

Gilmour identifies a tension implicit in the relationship between private reflection and public change:

The very forces which made the autobiographical task urgent also made it problematic. The prophets of progress saw the backward glance of autobiography as regressive, its surrender to introspection as a failure to measure up to the active, public virtues of a new civilisation.<sup>55</sup>

The 'prophets of progress' Gilmour alludes to are defined by David Thomson as the 'the prosperous industrialists and businessmen whose ethics now dominated English manners as they dominated English economic life.'<sup>56</sup> Their purpose was to ensure that productivity and material gain were the requisite products of a successful society. Their attitudes did not remain unchallenged and Thomson further comments on how they found their 'enemy in Matthew Arnold's bitter attack on barbarians and philistines'.<sup>57</sup> Thomson is referring to Arnold's book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) which promoted the civilising effects of literature. Gilmour's identification of the 'surrender to introspection' is reflective of the fact that Victorian debates around science and belief made introspection almost mandatory for the average thinking person. However, this kind of introspection was also reminiscent of the Romantics whose promotion of the French Revolution was a far too turbulent and revolutionary an association for such a progressive and nationalist era. Any person

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<sup>55</sup> Gilmour, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> David Thomson, *The Pelican History of England: 8 England in the Nineteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950; repr. 1981), p. 101.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

operating in ‘opposition to the prophets of progress’ was associating themselves with the dilatory and reactionary values of the Romantics and aligning themselves against the country’s interest.<sup>58</sup> A further implicit point from Gilmour’s observation is the composite and constructed nature of Victorian autobiography. Life writing in this era served as an exercise for the individual to extrapolate their societal role in relation to an era in the process of great change. This writing of history backwards placed the writer into a larger narrative and established their role in an era that was attempting to mould itself into society at large rather than stand apart from it. Gilmour even identifies the *act* of integration via ‘writing backwards’ as distasteful to a society that prided itself on its dynamic progressiveness. This is because introspection is a challenge to the active, and unreflective, progress of society at large of which the individual was only a constituent part.<sup>59</sup>

Anne Baltz Roderick explains the wider political context of the self in the nineteenth century. She argues that collective identity was important in the quest for the self and the improvement of the self:

[...] for large numbers of young men, self-improvement was [...] a collective venture, most often carried out within the bounds of the mutual improvement society. It encouraged the development of a specific model of corporate identity that functioned to replace class in two related ways. First, it emphasized common bonds among improvers while minimizing superficial differences. It did this by folding intellectual culture into an evolving model of public participation that

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<sup>58</sup> Gilmour, pp. 27-28.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

enhanced the social status of the individual improver while it positioned that individual and his fellows firmly in a broader local and national culture.<sup>60</sup>

Baltz Roderick identifies a congruence between self-improvement and the intellectual culture of the ruling classes. This meant that people who ascribed to developing themselves were essentially conforming to the established values of the era.

Despite the tension previously identified by Gilmour about the outward- and inward-looking self in the nineteenth century, it is understandable that the legacy of self-knowledge suggested by the Romantic movement combined with its concentration on the self and its relationship to society were absorbed into Victorian autobiographical writing. In most instances this took the form of a life writer enumerating the personal circumstances around their material achievements. As this approach was imbued with a scientific quality of cause and effect, it meant that the circumstances around the things the writer did to contribute materially towards a progressive society could be celebrated in the context of showing the virtues required to make their country an improved and better place.

#### John Harris, *My Autobiography*

John Harris's autobiography is a good example of a life writer enumerating the factors surrounding his material achievements. Throughout his book, *My Autobiography*, Harris painstakingly identifies the disadvantaged circumstances of his life. He then follows this with his commitment to self-improvement which leads to his successful poetic career. Most importantly, the ideological content of what constitutes much of Harris's poetic

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<sup>60</sup> Anne Baltz Rodrick, 'The Importance of Being an Earnest Improver: Class, Caste, and "Self-Help" in Mid- Victorian England', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 39-50 (p. 40).

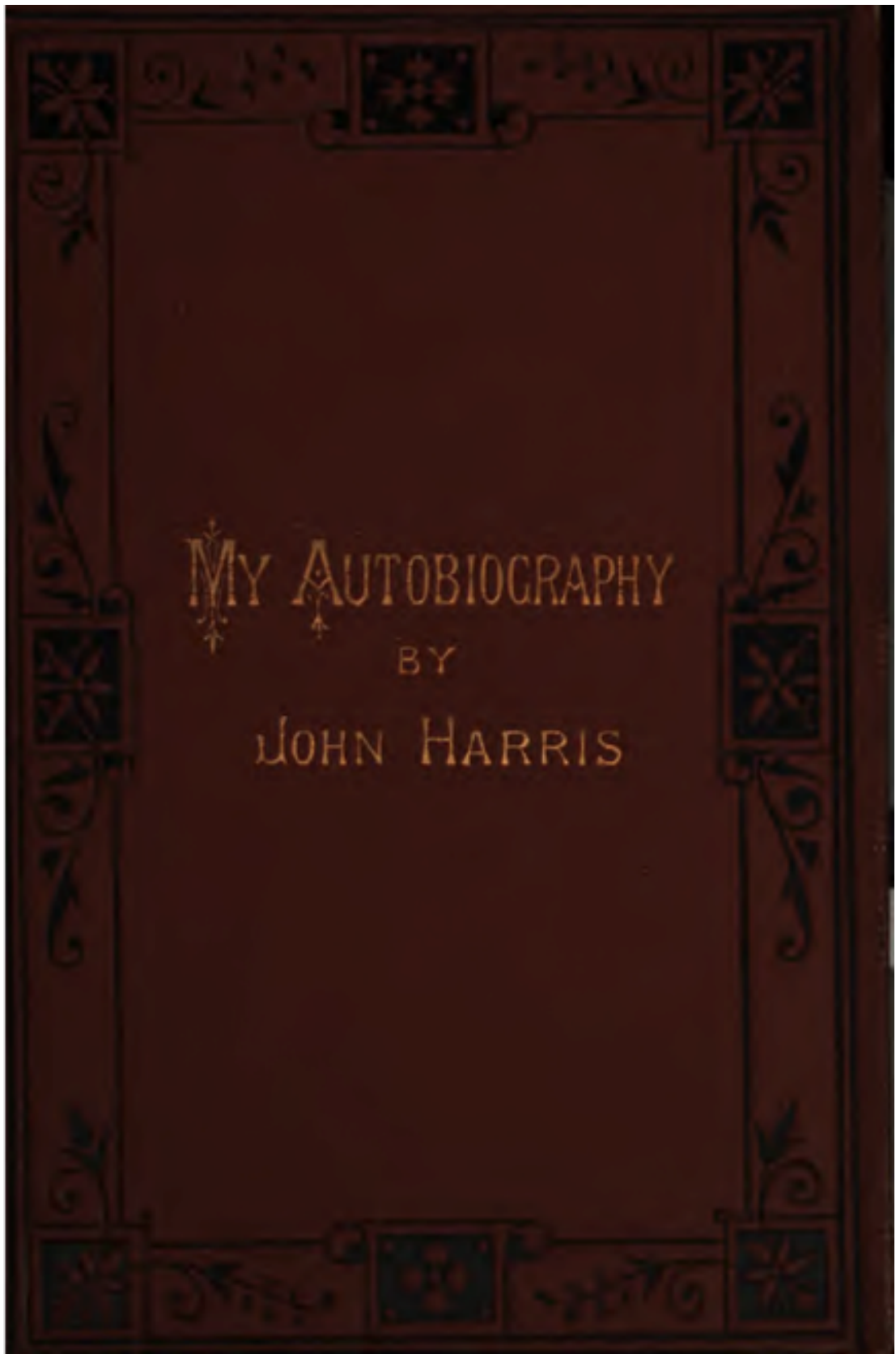
output appears to reinforce the Victorian society's perceptions of itself as progressive and dynamic on an unprecedented scale.

John Harris published his full autobiography in 1882 when he was 62 years old. It was entitled simply *My Autobiography*, and was published by John Gill, who was from Penryn, a small village near Falmouth. John Gill was a noteworthy character: a pacifist, Quaker, and vegetarian with a staunchly religious and anti-war viewpoint. He published the *Penryn Advertiser* which he used to promote his own liberal and religious opinions.<sup>61</sup>

*My Autobiography* numbers 128 pages and is broken into four key chapters followed by a short glossary of the mining terminology used in the autobiography. An image of the front cover can be found on the following page:

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<sup>61</sup> Newman, pp. 94-95.



The autobiographical section of the book is followed by fifteen previously unpublished poems focused on domestic themes with a tone of moral instruction. The final section is entitled, 'Living Poetical Writers' and is a series of reviews of Harris's previous poetry collections. All of these are univocally positive, placing a greater emphasis on Harris the man and his extraordinary life story rather than the poetry.

The narrative arc of *My Autobiography* centres around Harris's formative years and genesis as a poet culminating in his winning of the Shakespeare tercentenary prize in 1864 and the opportunities and recognition this then afforded him including his 'escape' from life as a miner.

Entitled simply, 'Early Life', Chapter 1 focuses on Harris's family history and childhood experiences interspersed with anecdotes about local characters and events. Harris takes time to establish the poverty of his upbringing. This serves the structural purpose of reinforcing his achievements as the book develops:

I first saw the light on Saturday, October 14<sup>th</sup> 1820. The rough house had no back door, nor any windows looking northward, except one about a foot square in the little pantry : but on the south side it had four windows, and a porch of primitive granite, literally small unpolished boulders. The wood-work of the roof was all visible, and sometimes the stars through the thatch ; though my father was sure to have a thick layer of reed put on as winter approached.<sup>62</sup>

The overarching tone of this extract is a dispassionate reflection of the poverty Harris was born into. This serves to reinforce his pragmatism and lack of self-pity. There is no hyperbolic language, just simple lexical choices that emphasise his material situation. The

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<sup>62</sup> Harris, p. 2.

boulders are literally 'small' and 'unpolished' reflecting the primitive nature of the building and the fact that there was little time or funds for something more cultivated. Precision features with the 'foot square' window in the 'little pantry' which again reinforces Harris's utilitarian perspective but also shows his straitened circumstances from birth. Harris is quick to avoid being too sentimental or emotive about the modesty of his early life and he allows the reader to form their own opinions. The fact that the reader is either already aware or becomes aware that he or she is reading an extensively published poet's life story invests this opening with a quiet dignity that further promotes Harris's material achievements.

The second chapter, 'Going to the Mine' deals with Harris's schooling and transition to the world of work as a tributor and then a miner. Emphasis is placed here on Harris's mining experience in both professional and personal terms. He explains some of the mechanical processes involved in mining as well as acknowledging his own feelings about working underground.

At ten years of age my father took me with him to Dolcoath Mine, to work on the surface, in assisting to dress and prepare copper ore for the market. Sometimes I had to work at the keeve,\* sometimes at the picking table, sometimes in the slide, sometimes on the floors, sometimes in the cobbing-house, and sometimes at the hutch. Sometimes I had to wheel the mineral in a barrow until the skin came off my hands, and my arms were deadened with the heavy burden. Sometimes I was scorched with the sun until I almost fainted ; and then I was wet with the rains of heaven so that I could scarcely put one foot before another. I left my home at six in the morning, and returned to it again at six in the evening. Yet I never complained,

nor would I if the same sharp scene had to be enacted again. God had placed me there, and I knew it was right.<sup>63</sup>

This passage extends the objective tone established in Chapter 1. Harris's reluctance to succumb to hyperbole or metaphor makes his plight seem more extreme. The skin comes off his hands, but he describes it in a matter of fact fashion that suggests that it is one of the privations of mining. The sole metaphor of the 'rains of heaven' suggests that all his suffering is part of a divine plan. His use of the conjunction 'yet' further emphasises a kind of stoic acceptance of the sibilant 'sharp scene'. This is a finely balanced piece of writing with the use of the word 'enacted' consolidating his viewpoint that his suffering was all part of God's plan. The use of the comma in the line 'God had placed me there, and I knew it was right' adds emphasis to the second part of the clause and reinforces Harris's unshakeable religious convictions. This quotation establishes that Harris does not have any ideas above his social status and accepts the necessity to work hard and be industrious if he is to be successful. These viewpoints are in line with the values of the Victorian era. His stoic acceptance of his privations suggest that he also understands his role and status as a labouring-class man. This would have endeared him to both a middle-class readership who were satisfied he understood his place in the social hierarchy as well as making him an object of identification or role model for his literate labouring-class peers.

Harris's delight in the natural world is also celebrated in this chapter setting up the relationship between his first attempts at writing poetry *en plein air* and his experiences underground. The implication here is that these experiences provided a catalyst to his creativity. Harris observes:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

\*The keeve is referred to in the glossary of terms on p.105 as 'a hooped barrel, half filled with water, where the rough mineral is washed in a sieve.'



But the Muse never left me above ground or below. I was always courting her, and she was the great solace of my life. In the dust and sulphur of the mine I was making lines to jingle, impelled onward by a strange power I could not resist. I sewed some leaves together and began to copy my effusions.<sup>64</sup>

What is slightly unusual in this extract is Harris's reference to both the natural, organic world and the one underground being an inspiration to him. This reinforces his commitment to poetry but also continues the passive and provident tone that dominates his autobiography. He presents poetry as completely central to his existence, explaining that it 'was the great solace of my life'. However, he is also keen to imply a religious aspect to this inspiration, describing his writing poetry as 'a strange power'. This allows him to avoid accusations of affectation and pretension by ascribing the motivation for his work as potentially divine as opposed to his own attempts at affecting middle-class interests which could potentially offend any of his social superiors who read his book.

Chapter 3, 'Home Life' is a composite of domestic anecdotes including Harris's marriage and children, further mining anecdotes and a celebration of both his literary influences and successes which culminates with the publication of his first poetry book. The domestic descriptions indicate a love of poetry writing and family which, when combined, bring Harris a deep joy:

Shall we take a peep, dear reader, at my Troon-Moor home? I have just returned from the hard drudgery of my daily toil in the interior of the mine, exhausted and cruelly crushed. A few worn books are piled up in a corner on some narrow shelves, three of the most conspicuous being, Walker's Dictionary, sweet Burns, and Shakespere. Nor must I forget my Bible, the gift of my sainted father, the sweet

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

stories of which so charmed me when a boy. Scraps of paper, written over with jingling rhyme, lie among the volumes, and sleep in quiet nooks, jotted by my own hand. A small fire is burning in the stove ; on one side of it sits my industrious wife, plying her needle with a smile upon her face ; a bright girl, with soft poetic eyes, is conning her lessons at my feet, and a blue-eyed boy, like a laughing Cupid, is climbing my knees and kissing my pale brow.<sup>65</sup>

The overall tone of the extract is that of a domestic bliss formed by poetry writing and family. Harris's use of a rhetorical question at the beginning of the extract shows his civility and generosity as he invites the reader into his home. In a departure from previous chapters, Harris gives in to hyperbolic language about his work as a miner, referring to it as 'drudgery' and 'toil'. This is then ameliorated by the next section of his description which confirms him as a man dedicated to self-improvement but who also knows his place. Harris's erudition is established with suitable modesty to avoid accusations of pretension and ideas above his station. He may be reading Shakespeare, but he has a dictionary to help him develop his burgeoning understanding. The dictionary also confirms his commitment to self-improvement. His mention of Burns also symbolises his interest in his fellow labouring-class men while offering a carefully implicit statement about his poetic aspirations. His 'scraps' of poetry are anthropomorphised into inanimate creatures that sleep suggesting his poetic facilities are still developing and dormant. This also allows his children to take a prominent position in the extract and excuses him from any accusations of neglect at the expense of middle-class affectations such as poetry writing. His children are described as erudite and angelic. This reinforces both the civility of their upbringing and reflects well on their father. His wife receives a mention as 'industrious'. Like Harris, she is hardworking and this presentation of her such goes some way to reinforce a representation of them as an entirely respectable labouring-class family with no

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

pretensions or bohemian excesses. Harris's presentation of himself is carefully measured. He aligns himself with the Victorian era's sentimental treatment of children and love of industry. This helps to ward off any concerns about the purpose of his poetic aspirations to his social superiors.

Chapter 4, 'Book Making', places an especial emphasis on Harris's near death experiences as a miner, which is then followed by his burgeoning reputation as a poet and his 'escape' from the mine. Yet again, Harris details these near death experiences in a matter of fact tone and attributes his survival to divine providence:

Throughout my mining-life I have had several narrow escapes from sudden death [...] the man-engine accidentally broke, hurling twenty men headlong into the pit, and I amongst them. A few scars and bruises were my only injuries. Standing before a tin-stope on the smallest foothold, a thin piece of flint, air-impelled, struck me on the face, cutting my lips and breaking some of my front teeth. Had I fallen backward among the huge slabs, death must have been instantaneous. Passing over a narrow plank, a hole exploded at my feet, throwing a shower of stones around me ; but not a single hair of my head was injured. A more wonderful interposition of Divine Providence may be traced, perhaps, in the following record.<sup>66</sup>

The more 'wonderful interposition of Divine Providence' that Harris describes is an explanation of how he and his fellow miners avoided being crushed by a rockfall due to the fact that they were teaching on the Sabbath. As *My Autobiography* develops, the theme of uncomplaining hard work continues. Harris describes working conditions so poor that they cause him to be mutilated. His front teeth are broken which he perceives to be a trifle compared with the possibility of his instantaneous death. Objectively speaking, this is true

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

but there is absolutely no rancour in Harris's descriptions of his privations which are far more extreme than those described in the previous chapter. Alongside this well-established and narrative thread of uncomplaining work, a new one develops. This is the role of the divine in continuing, and thus sanctioning, Harris's career as a poet. In Chapter 2, Harris attributes his harsh working conditions to God's will. In this chapter, the narrative develops slightly to show that God has actively saved him. Harris attributes this directly to the level of his religious devotion but this chapter directly moves on to focus on his debut poetry collection and his employment as a scripture reader at Falmouth. Harris describes this situation in explicit terms:

One evening Mr. Edward Bastin knocked at our door. He had often written me before, and had now heard of a Scripture Reader being required at Falmouth. Dear good man ! He had walked three miles forth, and three miles back in the twilight to tell me of it. He acted as kindly as a father, and at last procured the situation for me, where I have been for the last twenty-four years. Had I remained in the mine I could not have survived until now, so that Mr. Bastin's efforts have prolonged my life. It was very gratifying about this time to visit Penjerrick, the lovely residence of the late R.W. Fox, Esq., F.R.S., and to take tea with his household from a silver teapot, the ore being raised in Dolcoath mine, from which I had been so recently released.<sup>67</sup>

God's role in Harris's preservation is entirely literal here. Harris's knowledge of the Bible and religious faith means that he is saved from the life of 'drudgery' he complains of in Chapter 3. More importantly, Harris acknowledges that his life has been saved as he could not have consistently survived the sheer number of life-threatening incidents that were typical for a miner. This then facilitates his calling to poetry in the remainder of his

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

autobiography. At no point does Harris make this explicit but the renewed focus on him as a poet suggests his later poetic career is the product of divine intervention. The narrative then accelerates to accommodate Harris's poetic successes, including winning the Shakespeare Tercentenary Prize; his travels around England; the challenges of publishing of successive poetry collections; and an account of the grants he received and local dignitaries who he was acquainted with.

The overarching purpose of this book appears to be a reinforcement of the ideology that personal progress can be achieved by extraordinarily hard work. The autobiography shows that, although Harris is born into relative poverty, he takes comfort from religion and the natural landscape, works industriously to better himself, and surrenders his body to life-threatening work down the mine with relative equanimity. It demonstrates that his 'reward' for this is his moderate success as a poet, which was in the most part due to the support of his social superiors. A clear sense of duty, both to God and society at large, runs through the volume. This representation of mutual aid and moral welfare is not atypical of labouring-class biographies of this era. Florence S. Boos summarises the development of labouring-class autobiographies across the nineteenth century observing that:

In her annotated bibliography of *Nineteenth Century Working-Class Autobiographies*, Nan Hackett traced the development of *male* working-class autobiographies through three phases: an early period from 1800 to 1848, characterized by a heavily documented and class-oriented political emphasis, a middle period from 1848 to 1880, in which memoirs emphasized mutual aid and moral welfare, and a third period from 1880 to 1900, in which political activists

appealed for action, and more personal memoirists ceased to concern themselves with conforming to middle-class morality.<sup>68</sup>

Boos's comments and the timing of Harris's autobiography suggests that it fell just before a period of politically themed work that may well have made it egregiously unfashionable and further contributed towards Harris's immediate critical decline after his death.

#### The appeal and use of John Harris's life writing to his patrons

Harris made it easy for middle/upper class patrons to support him. Patronising labouring class writers was very appealing to middle-class mentors who were religious men, or industrialists if they espoused values that were of use to them. This is a view confirmed by Harris's biographer Paul Newman:

[Harris] became a byword in the district, a working man of high principles and lowly birth, who urged his fellows away from the tavern and into the chapel. The middle classes approved because he flattered and condoned their values. He was gifted yet modest, no overreacher.<sup>69</sup>

If Harris knew his place and encouraged his peers to turn up to work on time and in a fit state to be productive, it is obvious that the content of his poetry was likely to contain a message of value to his social superiors. Businessmen and industrialists saw themselves as products of a great era. Harris's awareness of and attitude towards his social position which was espoused in both his life and his poetry encouraged his peers to do the same.

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<sup>68</sup> Florence S. Boos, *Memoirs of Victorian Working-Class Women: The Hard Way Up* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> Newman, p. 60.

Harris's true value to his social superiors was that he facilitated their chances of becoming even more successful in their exploitation of labouring-class workers for pecuniary gain.

Harris's prefatory comments to his book, *My Autobiography* confirm the power and influence of the patron on the book itself:

The author has been solicited by several of his friends to publish his Autobiography in a separate form [...] In compliance with their requests he brings out this little book [...] He trusts his lifelong perseverance under difficulties, his untiring struggles after literature, and his unflagging pursuit of song under all circumstances, may induce not a few of the young of his own country to pursue with indomitable zeal the pleasant path of right. To them, as well to his intelligent countrymen generally, he trustfully commits the following imperfect pages, with the hope of the scattered grain bearing some little fruit after many days.<sup>70</sup>

From a contemporary point of view this comment could be seen as falsely modest and sycophantic. Harris is clearly evaluating the relationship between his self-appointed role as a writer and his place in society when he suggests that this autobiographical writing will serve as an example to younger generations about how to conduct themselves. The power dynamic between Harris and his 'friends' is made explicit by the word 'compliance'. The liturgical language such as 'zeal' and the allusion to the 'path of right' imply that this conduct should be in accordance with the religious principles dominant in the Victorian era. Harris praises his 'intelligent countrymen', thus flattering his mentors, and uses the industrious verb 'commits' to further reinforce his perseverance in attempting to bear some 'little fruit' from the 'scattered grain' of his poetry. This extended metaphor emphasises Harris's desire to influence people in a way that is appropriate to his social standing while

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<sup>70</sup> John Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. iii.

thanking those who have provided him with this opportunity. The agricultural nature of the metaphor also implies that he is not so presumptuous as to think this influence should be extended to persons of a more advantaged and non-labouring background. This quotation also euphemistically refers to the religious and socio-economic groups to which Harris was trying to appeal. The ‘friends’ are clearly his patrons who feel that his life writing facilitates a good moral example to the ‘young of his own country’. I would suggest that ‘country’ is used metaphorically here to suggest the county of Cornwall and that Harris’s autobiography is targeted at labouring-class Methodist men. The ‘zealous path of right’ he advocates is one of sober hard work that would have been of benefit to his established patrons and ‘friends’, some of whom would have been from a more middle-class Anglican background. They would have viewed themselves as the social superiors to the labouring-class Methodist men Harris was hoping to influence with his ‘scattered grain’. Despite the truthful connotations of life writing, Harris’s preface sets up a clear sense of agency where his writing both accommodates the dominant political and religious themes of the era and mirrors them to the benefit of his ‘friends’ who have asked him to produce this piece of writing in the first instance. As John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan observe, the encouragement Harris received was not unusual:

From the early eighteenth century onward, poets of humble origin were encouraged to write about their own working lives, and were presented to the reading public by their patrons and publishers in ways that foregrounded a class-based biographical context. The phenomenon of the “peasant-poet” was perceived as a species of natural genius, a kind of home-grown noble savage, whose poetry miraculously emerged from a rustic lifestyle, specifically without benefit of formal training and thus untainted with classicism or learned sophistry.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, ‘Introduction’, in *A History of British Working Class Literature*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1-9 (p. 4).



Keegan and Goodridge's comments about a 'rustic lifestyle' correlate neatly with the 'scattered grain' of Harris's autobiographical writing, both setting up its authenticity and establishing Harris as a kind of savant who was a role model to his peers.

Harris's autobiography was of 'use' to his patrons and social superiors due to its non-radical ideological stance where authority is not questioned; hard work for little reward is seen as praiseworthy and hopes for betterment are limited. However, he also used it to construct a myth around his own achievements. Commenting on *My Autobiography*, Paul Newman observes:

But what dominates the book is the poet's self-image. His struggle is seen as something miraculous and mythical: he is the triumphal voice of poesy, breaking down the barriers of circumstance. [The book contains] vivid accounts of mining life and passages of pastoral and religious emotion.<sup>72</sup>

Newman's hyperbole does seem justified. Structurally, the four chapters of *My Autobiography* establish a disadvantaged childhood and an unwavering faith in God's agency. These are then combined with a superhuman tolerance of physical hardship and an incomparable commitment to poetry which then culminate in the litany of 'achievements' that populate the final chapter. These include winning a national prize, receiving the attention of local dignitaries, and publishing several volumes of poetry.

Comparisons can be drawn here between Leslie Stephen's endorsement of the painstaking research into making 'second-rate lives' accessible and the efforts involved for a middle-class mentor in promoting writing from someone from a lower social order. If the

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<sup>72</sup> Newman, p. 128.

patronised has ‘merit’, it reflects positively on the patron. The opening chapter of Harris’s autobiography reinforces this point:

If the simple record of my life-struggle should fail to interest the general reader, it may excite the attention of my patrons and friends, and stimulate the child of genius to patient perseverance ; and its compilation will bring comfort to my own heart.<sup>73</sup>

Harris’s careful ‘may’ when referring to his patrons is suitably modest. It also excuses the self-indulgence of his comforting internal reflections with the public opportunity to indoctrinate humility in the gifted labouring-class child and credit the humanity and indulgence of the patrons who have allowed this work to exist in the first place. As has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Harris wished to further reinforce critics’ perceptions of him as a product of Victorian society. His poetry was reflective of a ‘gifted soul [that dignifies] “daily toil in the darkness of the mine”’ and who ensured that ‘no man [could] read these poems without rising from their perusal a better man’.<sup>74</sup>

Harris establishes his credentials before the opening of *My Autobiography* by reprinting his poem ‘Davie Drake’ from his collection *Bulo; Reuben Ross; A Tale of the Manacles; Hymn, Song and Story*. This poem is a simple ‘rags to riches’ tale that serves to emphasise the importance of self-sufficiency and effort to material success while conspicuously failing to give any specifics as to how these things might be actualised. The poem’s endorsement of uncomplaining hard work with no expectations of support are enforced by its third stanza:

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<sup>73</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> [Author Unknown], ‘Poetry and the Drama’, *The Critic*, 1 January 1856, p. 469.

His friends were poor, his kindred few ;

His father was a hedger ;

His only uncle on the cliff

A weather-beaten dredger.

He had no one his mind to guide

To teach him e'en the letters :

So Davie said, " I'll teach myself,

And climb towards my betters."<sup>75</sup>

The ideological message of this stanza is acceptance. There are no offers of support for the poor. Instead, a responsibility is placed on the individual to improve their circumstances. Despite the fact that this gap between the rich and poor was sizeable and exploitative, it is apparent that this was a message of value to Harris's middle-class patrons. This was primarily for two reasons. Firstly, it absolved them of social responsibility as a labouring-class man was promoting the message of self-reliance to his peers. It also supported their opportunities to take advantage of others without feeling guilty about the situation as the onus had been placed on the less fortunate. The poem concludes in a triumphant style. This was not entirely imitative of Harris's own experiences, although it was concomitant with the era's values of the rewards for self-reliance and hard work. Paul Newman's observation about Harris's portrayal of himself triumphing over circumstance can be seen here, albeit in the form of the fictional character of Davie Drake:

At last he reached the golden height

With streaks of glory laden ;

He gained the Lily of the Loch,

The banker's matchless maiden.

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<sup>75</sup> John Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. ix.

He gained the honour of his race,  
Who bowed before his lyre.  
Still Davie Drake this motto bears :  
“ To higher things and higher.”<sup>76</sup>

Davie’s achievements at the end of this poem after some unspecified hard work and self-sufficiency are an improvement in social standing and literary success indicated by the symbols of the ‘banker’s matchless maiden’ where wealth is equated with beauty and the ‘lyre’ as representative of his poetic capabilities. To return to the poem’s lack of specificity about Davie’s means of success is to miss the point, the poem is intended to be a myth offering labouring-class people the hope that hard work and self-sufficiency might achieve success.

Harris’s choice of a poem before he begins the act of life writing might be seen as a curious melange of fictional and non-fictional writing but, as David Amigoni acknowledges, this blurring of fiction and non-fiction in biographical writing was symptomatic of the era, noting that ‘later twentieth-century critics have been less inclined to accept claims about the generic purity of either biography or autobiography.’<sup>77</sup> Amigoni cites Richard D. Altick’s observation, made in 1965, that ‘biography in the nineteenth century was ‘an unstable compound.’<sup>78</sup> Twentieth-century critics’ observations about the generic purity of autobiography and biography may to a certain extent have missed the point in terms of Harris’s purposes when writing his autobiography. In the previous citations from the Preface to his autobiography, Harris openly acknowledges the narrowed focus of his work in terms of his poverty and life struggle, his literary aspirations, and the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>77</sup> David Amigoni, ‘Introduction: Victorian Life Writing: Genres, Print, Constituencies’, in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. by David Amigoni (London: Routledge, 2006; repr. 2017), pp. 1-19 (p. 1).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

narrative aspect of his own work. By framing his own narrative, Harris exhibits a kind of reflexivity by tacitly acknowledging the performativity and purpose of his narrative. As Harris intends to portray himself as a role model, this mythmaking and presentation are far more important than notions of the 'truth' if he is to maximise his influence. George P. Landow summarises the arguments around the myth-making and metaphorical aspects of autobiographical writing thus:

According to Avrom Fleishman, one of the most basic ways that the autobiographer has of ordering the experiences of that paradoxical, problematic, elusive entity he seeks "is to choose a metaphor of the self and develop it in a narrative or other sequence, which may be called a conversion of metaphor into myth. . . . The completed sequence is a *personal myth*."<sup>79</sup>

It is worthwhile considering whether Harris's agency was such that his inclusion of the poem, 'Davie Drake' before the opening chapter of his autobiography was an implicit acknowledgement of the metaphor of the self into myth. It is the values that are important as they promote ideas that were commensurate with and agreeable to Harris's middle-class mentors and the other labouring-class men and women he wanted to influence. It is impossible to tell from this poem whether Harris was aware that his suggestion that the era's values of hard work and self-sufficiency always led to material success made it even easier for his affluent middle classes readership to justify their exploitation of the poor.

Harris's adherence to the dominant values of the Victorian era are evident in both 'Davie Drake' and Harris's autobiographical preface. Both of them use the third person perspective to imbue their sentiments with the appropriate level of humble modesty. His

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<sup>79</sup> George P. Landow, *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), p. xxxiv.

previous observation that he ‘may induce not a few of the young of his own country to pursue with indomitable zeal the pleasant path of right’ shows Harris pointing the way forward to the ‘young’ in a didactic and moralistic manner but also acknowledging the potential limitations of his influence.<sup>80</sup> In terms of Harris’s own experience, he was able to pursue the ‘pleasant path of right’ due to his publication of poetry that advocated for both his religious and, latterly political, beliefs which were in accordance with his sponsors. However, if after having read the poem ‘Davie Drake’ that followed his preface, Harris’s readers were hoping that Harris was inspired from personal experience when he describes the general populace bowing ‘before [Davie’s] lyre’ and the material reward and social mobility implied by Davie’s marriage to the ‘banker’s matchless maiden’ they would find him a disappointing role model. His own life story did not quite match up to the messages in his poetry highlighting the constructed nature of his work. Harris’s biographer, Newman, summarises his perspective of Harris’s poetic influence which is more in line with the ‘scattered grain bearing little fruit’ that he alludes to in his preface:

Judged objectively, his life could hardly be classed as a failure: all of his work had attained the permanence of hard covers, unlike that of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), whose poems had to be posthumously issued through the agency of Robert Bridges. But there was no steady growth of Harris’s reputation, and after the flare-path of his early success and the winning of the Shakespeare Prize, not a great deal had happened to enhance his standing.<sup>81</sup>

Newman’s interpretation of Harris’s poetic success confirms that although he was able to publish extensively, his sphere of influence was not as wide ranging as he might have liked. After his winning of the prize, Newman is right to say that Harris was unable to

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<sup>80</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. iii.

<sup>81</sup> Newman, pp. 123-24.

further enhance his poetic reputation or influence in any substantial way. For a young person who had read his work and knew about his life, Harris's financial success was perhaps a little closer to Davies's. Reproducing a copy of Harris's will, he comments that Harris's personal estate was valued at £1098 14s 7d which was much more of a middle-class income than his previous poetic claims of poverty might suggest. Newman likens the value of this estate to £57,000 in today's money.<sup>82</sup> Considering how humble Harris's background, this was a substantial achievement commensurate with the messages he espoused in 'Davie Drake'. The comparisons between Harris's expressed intentions in the preface to his autobiography and his myth making are worth contrasting with the reality of his experiences as they highlight the extent to which his messages may have been ideologically helpful for his mentors but were unlikely to happen for his labouring-class peers.

Throughout *My Autobiography*, Harris's continued self-presentation identifies his hardships and privations as a catalyst for his own poetic and material achievements. In some senses, as his autobiography develops, Harris confirms and elaborates on the myths contained in his opening poem 'Davie Drake'. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of *My Autobiography* there are scattered allusions to the stygian darkness of the mine juxtaposed with Harris's euphoria at being above ground in the light of the natural world of God's creation. This example from when Harris was around 12 years old is typical:

The level was very uneven, so that the barrow, which had a lighted candle stuck in the front end, often slipped from my hands. Some of the corners, too, were very jagged and abrupt, against which I struck my joints, knocking off the skin until the blood ran down. Child as I was I had made up my mind not to cry ; but the tears

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

forced themselves out of my eyes upon my face, which I wiped away with my clayey fingers, and tugged and pushed at the heavy barrow. I thought of my mother's smile, the welcome which awaited me at home, and the dear bower of heather where I should watch the moon rise by and by harp in hand ; and I struggled on in my mining yoke, chanting quaint couplets of new-made rhyme to the echoes of my cavern. Soon after this I wrote :—

To-day I've thrashed an old tin-rib,

Till I could thrash no more,

While streams of perspiration ran

Unchecked from every pore.

A fire-cloud drank my spirits up :

How longed I for the breeze

The hoary-headed woodman quaffs

Among the forest-trees !<sup>83</sup>

Harris's creativity is emphasised by his suffering in the mine. He is brought to tears by physical discomfort working underground but the juxtaposition between his suffering in the mine and the euphoria he experiences when above ground is presented as a spur to his poetry writing. The life enhancing qualities of his family and the natural world are more joyful and life affirming due to their contrast with the stress and pain of mining. To emphasise his stoicism, Harris is matter of fact: 'the blood ran down'; his fingers 'were clayey'; the barrow was 'heavy'. The literal language here provides a complete lack of hyperbole or melodrama. The purpose of this was to avoid accusations of self-pity from a more privileged audience as well as to serve as a role model of endurance for any readers who might be experiencing similar levels of hardship. This more direct approach also then

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<sup>83</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 39.



offers a sharp juxtaposition to Harris's description of his imaginative faculties which appear to have taken flight due to his privations. He imagines himself 'harp in hand' and suddenly the mine is a forbidding but fantastical place where mining language becomes appropriated for figurative use, as 'streams of perspiration' run down while the anthropomorphised 'fire-cloud drank [his] spirits up'. Despite this, he is still able to convert his reduced spirits into these 'quaint couplets' for the readers' edification, again absolving them of responsibility for any privations he might suffer with the consolation that it was aiding his creativity and ability to entertain them.

Harris's construction of himself through autobiographical writing was typical of the nineteenth century approach to life writing. Philip Holden clarifies the formation of the self that distinguishes the creation of the self in the nineteenth century:

Life writing that emerged in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe and North America is distinctively different from earlier forms [...] Karl Weintraub characterizes this difference in terms of a new notion of "development" that replaces an earlier principle of "unfolding": the story of a life, rather than being seen as developing according to an overall principle "as if by a necessary, predetermined sequentiality" is now about the formation of a self through interaction with the world. [...] For Weintraub, autobiography is marked by a retrospective attention to the development of a unique personality through its encounter with the world, through a cultivation of "individuality" in which every "individual existence is but one of actualizations of...[an] indefinitely variable human potential."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Philip Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 18-19.

Holden distinguishes here between previous notions of life writing as the unfolding of a life from a pre-determined plan to one where the self is formed in relation to the world it inhabits. This then imbues these influences with the ability to shape and inform a person's personality which has occurred distinctly as the composite of an infinitude of potential influences.

In the opening chapter of Harris's autobiography, he establishes himself as being influenced and empowered by his labouring-class peers in matters of introspection. Harris makes an explicit reference to the labouring-class Scottish writer, James Hogg (1777–1835). Referencing Hogg enables Harris to acknowledge that working men are allowed to be introspective too:

James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, has somewhat humorously said, "I like to write about myself : in fact, there are few things which I like better ; it is so delightful to call up old reminiscences." So I have sat down to write about myself, and to enjoy some of the delight of which the Scotch poet speaks, in rambling in thought over long-forsaken tracts, and pleasantly musing through the dim aisles of the Past.<sup>85</sup>

Harris escapes accusations of self-indulgence by cloaking his comments with a level of humour. The subtle use of the adverb 'humorously' enables him to strike a more self-deprecating note. Without it, he would be investing his reflections with a level of importance beyond a man of his social status. The verbs 'rambling' and 'musing' also add a meandering quality to the reflections. Although on one level this may seem self-indulgent, it could also suggest that the thoughts and reflections afforded by his thinking are appropriate for the uneventful life of a labouring-class man. The whole sense of the opening is not one where Harris gives the impression that he is entertaining any delusions

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<sup>85</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 1.

of grandeur. This level of self-deprecation further endears him to his sponsors and mentors as it reassures them he knows his place in line with the established values of the period. This is further emphasised by his formative experiences with literature which show his perseverance and self-sufficiency when educating himself. At the beginning of Chapter 2, he comments that

My father presented me with a penny Robinson Crusoe with a rude frontispiece, which I carried to my bedchamber with me every night. This was my first book, except the school primer, which I could really call my own. About this time a ragged copy of Burns's "Cotter's Saturday Night" fell into my hands, which I found on an old shelf in my mother's kitchen, where a store of rich trifles in my boyish eyes lay among the dust and cobwebs, and which I read with great avidity over and over again, until I could pretty well understand its meaning in the Scotch dialect.<sup>86</sup>

The word 'presented' carries the connotations of formality and ceremony to Harris's formative experiences of Defoe's novel. This is juxtaposed with the serendipitous quality of Harris discovering Burns. This is not presented to him but falls 'into his hands' in what the reader might assume is an act of divine intervention. Harris's 'great avidity' and the repetition of 'over' reinforce his presentation of himself as a young boy already looking to improve his circumstances and abilities. When viewed in the context of Harris's comments in his preface about wishing to educate the young to behave correctly, this is yet another example of him presenting himself carefully as a role model worthy of being accorded a degree of moderate influence from his social superiors.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

Newman's previously cited observation about Harris's autobiography containing 'passages of pastoral and religious emotion' is important when viewing Harris's autobiography in context as a constructed piece of writing.<sup>87</sup> Although Harris's own self presentation is designed to appeal to his social superiors in the book, there is also a sense of construction in terms of the tone of its writing which is also designed to appeal to their religious sensibilities, and emphasise his respectability to them. *My Autobiography* was published in the late 1800s. At this point the imaginative definition of literature was overtaking the religious one and this is reflected in the book's awkward tone. An example of this can be found in the citation from Harris's autobiography below. This tells an anecdote with a heavily religious flavour which, try as he might, Harris cannot refrain from blending with the imaginative:

A singular story was often told me of my grandmother Smith going out of doors one summer night but with few clothes on. She wandered into their own fields, and cried bitterly as she went. She was in trouble, and trouble drove her to God. She looked at the bright stars as they twinkled overhead, and felt that their faces were kinder than those of her kindred [...] She stood by a granite stile where the ivy clung to the boulders, and the stone-crop clambered over the rocks, and wiped the tears from her face. And those tears did not fall unheeded in the darkness of night [...] She loved her Bible and her God, and knew where to take her sorrows. Lifting her hands to the starry firmament, she prayed to Him there, as she had often prayed in her stricken home, and the Lord heard her. Suddenly, she affirms, there was an angel with her. [...] What he disclosed to her no-one knows ; but it was noticed that she was never so cast down with domestic troubles afterwards.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Newman, p. 128.

<sup>88</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 4-5.

Here, there is a kind of forced blend with the imaginative and religious precept. Harris was clearly a man with a devout and abiding religious faith, but he was also a man who delighted in imaginative descriptions of the natural world. Harris's imaginative intensity is evident here in lines such as 'ivy clung to the boulders' and 'lifting her hands to the starry firmament' which almost threaten to overthrow the moral of the story. This anecdote also treads a potentially fine line between the imaginative and the blasphemous due to the mention of an unconfirmed divine visitation. Harris is careful to suggest that his grandmother 'affirms' the story and that no-one knows what the Angel 'disclosed' but there is a sense in this extract of the poet overpowering the religious man. The appeal of this kind of passage to Harris's sponsors and social superiors was its explicit suggestion that God was the solution to all troubles as opposed to any support they might be asked to provide.

Gilmour (cited earlier in this chapter) suggested that the role of Victorian autobiography was to assimilate the private self with a rapidly changing and developing public sphere.<sup>89</sup> Thus, if introspection was considered a necessary evil from a man of eminence evaluating his contributions to the Victorian society that made him, grandiose and self-indulgent literary effusions from a labouring-class man of no notable achievements other than patronised poetry books would not be to the general readers' taste. This explains much of Harris's constructed self-presentation in this chapter. He portrays himself as someone who has embraced and lived the Victorian era's core values and ideologies and was able to achieve substantial success without relying too much on his social superiors and primarily placing his hope and trust in religion in the face of hardship. Although in general, critics were gentle with Harris, preferring to praise his work rather than find fault with it, the dissenting voice of Sabine Baring-Gould was strident in its denunciation of Harris's poetic gift as we will see in the next section.

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<sup>89</sup> Gilmour, p. 27.

## Changes in literary fashion

The uses of Harris's autobiography were time limited from an historicist context. As society's perceptions of itself changed, Harris's use as an example of a self-made man who promoted Victorian values became of less interest and relevance to either his social superiors or his peers as the era drew to a close. During the nineteenth century, Harris's constructed prose style was a reflection of his literary betters and indicative of the moral benefits of his writing. As the century drew to a close, it began to be seen as an egregious example of pretension.

This was highlighted in 1909 by Sabine Baring-Gould in his critical response to Harris's autobiography in his text *Cornish Characters and Strange Events*. Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924) was a Devonshire writer with a particular interest in Devon and Cornwall. *Cornish Characters and Strange Events* is a series of autobiographical sketches of various Cornishmen who Baring-Gould felt had not received due attention in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Baring-Gould outlines his intentions in the Preface:

It has been the object of the author, not to retell the lives of the greatest of the sons of Cornwall, for these lives may be read in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but to chronicle the stories of lesser luminaries concerning whom less is known and little is easily accessible. In this way it serves as a companion volume to *Devonshire Characters*; and Cornwall in no particular falls short of Devonshire in the variety of characters it has sent forth, nor are their stories of less interest.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *Cornish Characters and Strange Events* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. viii-ix.

Baring-Gould's stated intention is not particularly accurate where Harris is concerned, inasmuch as his book was published in 1909, twenty-seven years after Harris's publication of *My Autobiography*. Harris's autobiography was also updated by Harris's son John Howard Harris in 1885, and Harris's *Dictionary of National Biography* entry published in 1891. This meant that individuals interested in Harris's life story could make themselves acquainted with three pieces of extant material. Baring-Gould's claim to 'to chronicle the stories of lesser luminaries concerning whom less is known and little is easily accessible' is therefore either a denial of the extant material which he had in fact read or an indication that he felt that there was more work to be done on this 'lesser luminary'.

In the preface to the book, Baring-Gould's aims are more explicit in his survey of Cornwall's artistic output:

It [Cornwall] has sent forth at least one notable painter, the miner's boy Opie, and a dramatist, Samuel Foote, and a great singer in his day, Incledon. But it has not given to literature a great poet. Minor rhymes have been produced in great quantities, but none of great worth.<sup>91</sup>

As well as serving as a document of significant but overlooked Cornish lives, Baring-Gould was also hierarchising them with the implicit message that some did not require further documentation. His depictions of varying subjects from inventors to wrestlers also judge the social impact of his subjects' lives, and he is often negative. Towards the end of the book, there is a section on John Harris entitled, 'John Harris, The Miner Poet.' Baring-Gould says:

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

a set of verses without ideas may be pleasant verses, but is not poetry ; and without ideas and without imagination is very poor stuff indeed. John Harris could write smooth lines, he had a tender appreciation of the beauties of nature, but he went no further. His verses bear the same relation to poetry that Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy* bears to the Philosophy of Plato.<sup>92</sup>

Baring-Gould's principal concern regarding Harris as a poet is that he simply does not make the grade in terms of his ideas or imagination, although he does allow the poet some technical facility regarding Harris's 'smooth lines'. Although this book was published in 1909 and the Victorian era is commonly identified as ending in 1901, this critique bears much of the ideology of Victorian criticism as part of the 'long nineteenth century'.

Initially, the contrast between Baring-Gould and Harris might not seem great. Harris was a lay preacher, poet, and hymn writer as well. However, when one considers Baring-Gould's family background, the differences between them become more marked. Dickinson suggests that the Baring-Gould family could trace their ancestry back to thirteenth-century Norman origins.<sup>93</sup> Baring-Gould's social status afforded him a far more diverse set of experiences than those available to Harris, but it is precisely these similarities and differences that inform Baring-Gould's critique of Harris as their social status was markedly different. Baring-Gould's critique of Harris appears to stem from a class-based perspective as much of his criticism of Harris's writing is concerned with its aspirant qualities in terms of its literary stylings. Primarily, Baring-Gould focuses his critique of Harris on his autobiographical writing rather than his poetic works, short stories, or essays. He both comments on the work that Harris produces in *My Autobiography* and the autobiographical fragment entitled 'Peeps at a Poet' that can be found in *The Story of Carn*

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 692.

<sup>93</sup> Bickford H.C. Dickinson, *Sabine Baring-Gould: Squarson, Writer and Folklorist, 1834-1924* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1970), p. 14.



*Brea*. His reason for targeting Harris's autobiographical writing is presumably due to the focus of his book, *Cornish Characters and Strange Events* which looks to evaluate each individual's contributions to culture, politics, or society. For Baring-Gould, Harris's self-perception is the first barrier to his being an estimable personage as it reflects far too high an opinion of himself. Baring-Gould also connects Harris's pretentious self-image with the defects of his poetry and chooses his life writing to illustrate the inadequacies that he argues are found in the poetry.

To illustrate his point, Baring-Gould begins by paraphrasing parts of the 'Peeps of a Poet' section of *The Story of Carn Brea* where Harris describes himself in the third person using highly figurative language:

At twelve he was working on the surface "nearly three miles from his favourite home. As he travels to and fro from his labour through long lanes bramble covered, and over meadows snowy with daisies, or by hedges blue with hyacinths, or over whispering cairns redolent with the hum of bees—" he means thyme on which the bees hover gathering honey—"the beautiful world around me teemed with syllables of song."<sup>94</sup>

After criticising Harris's misunderstanding of flora and insects, Baring-Gould gives his opinion on Harris's descriptions of the natural world and the defects they highlight in his perceptive powers:

One thing is evident, that at this early age he was inordinately conceited. He had a true appreciation of the beauties of Nature. He had a receptive soul, but it was that which might have made of him a painter, not necessarily a poet.

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<sup>94</sup> Baring-Gould, p. 694.

At the age of thirteen, or as he styles it, “When thirteen summers have filled his lap with roses, and fanned his forehead with the breeze of health, we find him sweating in the hot air of the interior of a mine.”<sup>95</sup>

Baring-Gould’s reference to Harris’s ‘inordinate’ conceit and ‘as he styles it’ can be read as, at the very least, irritation at the performative aspect of Harris’s writing style. I argue here that Baring-Gould takes particular issue with the influence of Romanticism on Harris’s work. By this I mean, Baring-Gould’s perception is that Harris’s view of the sublime is inadequately expressed and inconceivable coming from someone with his educational background and class status. The line ‘thirteen summers have filled his lap with roses’ shows Harris making use of figurative language to highlight the ecstasy he feels in the natural world. This has much in common with the Romantic notion of the sublime. However, for Baring-Gould, this metaphorical hyperbole evidences poor poetic judgement. Harris’s use of Romanticism could have irritated Gould for several reasons. I contend that the primary ones are a combination of class status and literary ambition. All of the key figures from the ‘Big Six’ of Romanticism were established literary figures who did not originate from labouring-class backgrounds. For Harris to appropriate this literary style as a labouring-class man must have seemed highly pretentious to Baring-Gould. Baring-Gould’s satirising of Harris’s style proves that he also believes him incapable of using it effectively. Donna Landry confirms that when evaluating labouring-class poetry ‘that aesthetics and politics can never be entirely divorced from one another is one of the truths repeatedly revealed by the study of laboring class writing.’<sup>96</sup> Landry is writing from the perspective of a critic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but the act of appropriating literary stylings

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Donna Landry, ‘Foreword’, in *A History of British Working Class Literature*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. xvii-xxii (p. xix).

was clearly a challenge to Baring-Gould's sense of the class hierarchy. There are also notions of literary taste to consider. Baring-Gould was writing through the mid-Victorian to the Edwardian era. From the perspective of literary periods, the Edwardian era during which Baring-Gould published this criticism had moved from Victorian Romanticism and was on its way to the beginnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. This emerging taste may have caused him to view Harris's florid qualities with a degree of horror.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their similar professions and common interests, Baring-Gould finds it hard to credit Harris with the ability to express his feelings about the natural world which surely cannot have differed so much from his own. The fact that he attributes Harris's linguistic inadequacy to the intrinsic ability of his class is partially confirmed later in Baring-Gould's chapter on him: 'John Harris was evidently vastly sorry for himself, thinking he was born for better things. I have known many a man who has worked underground as a common miner, without whining and breaking into extravagance such as this.'<sup>97</sup> Any perceived arrogance in Harris's writing about his life as a miner is difficult to evidence. Most of Harris's comments about mining either indicate his anxiety or stoicism or detail the processes of mining for the general interest of the reader. It is not the self-pitying content in Harris's work that bothers Baring-Gould, then, as it is not really present, but rather it is the appropriation of literary styles that he considers entirely inappropriate for a man of Harris's position in society. Harris's highly descriptive writing style shows to Baring-Gould that he indeed thinks himself born for better things otherwise he would have chosen a simpler style reflective of his social status. For Baring-Gould, to render a workmanlike activity such as mining in Parnassian and romantic prose is inappropriate and shows Harris's conceit and lack of literary judgement.

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<sup>97</sup> Baring-Gould, pp. 696-67.

Baring-Gould's only praise for Harris is reserved for when he adopts the less florid writing style he uses in *My Autobiography*. In this instance, he quotes an entire section of Harris's autobiography to show that he does not think it deserves the satire he had offered of Harris's more florid writing in *A Story of Carn Brea*. The section Baring-Gould cites concerns Harris relaying the story of a visit from a local clergyman who reads one of his poems entitled 'The Child's Prayer' and is moved to tears by the experience. After quoting Harris accurately, he observes that:

I have given this passage from the *Autobiography* of John Harris with pleasure, as it exhibits the author at his best. Whether the tears may not have been an adjunct of his fancy, I do not pretend to say. When he writes simple English, concerning his own life and experiences, he is always interesting, but when he steps up into his florid car, as a chauffeur at the Battle of Roses at Nice, he is intolerable.<sup>98</sup>

Baring-Gould comments that 'concerning his own life and experiences [Harris] is always interesting'. This suggests that Harris's true value lies in being a historical document and embodies a similar philosophy to Leslie Stephen's with his interest in second rate lives. Baring-Gould then observes that 'whether the tears may not have been an adjunct of his fancy, I do not pretend to say'. This suggests that the clergyman's emotional response to Harris's poetry may well be artistic licence and not creditable. The line 'when he writes simple English, concerning his own life and experiences, he is always interesting' shows that Baring-Gould thinks Harris's use of literal language far exceeds his figurative use of it. This is further reinforced by his closing line about Harris stepping up into his 'florid car'. The phrase 'steps up' suggests that Baring-Gould feels that Harris is climbing above either his ability or station in the act of crafting poetry or imaginative prose. Romanticism still had a large influence on the Victorian era, particularly on Tennyson, and it seems

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 697.

reasonable to suggest that, for Baring-Gould, Harris's use of any of its conventions was a pale imitation where hyperbole replaced originality and emotional effect. From Harris's perspective, it might be argued that he was describing the ecstatic pleasure he took in what he perceived to be the natural world created by God.

### Conclusion

As has been shown throughout this chapter, defining the audience for Harris's autobiographical performance is complex. In his preface, Harris himself identifies his writing as an act of introspection, which immediately places him at a disadvantage in an era focused on progression and celebrating the men who were a product of this great society.

The content of Harris's autobiographical writing suggests that he wishes to identify himself as a good man and a role model who is a shining example of the society that made him. This level of humility also meant that both Harris's corpus and life story was of use to his patrons as it reinforced their view of themselves as personages responsible for creating a great era and negated any guilt they may have felt about their possible potential exploitation of the working man. Despite Harris's talent for poetry and his literary successes, he was a conservative figure who did not challenge the status quo. This meant that any other labouring-class man looking to Harris for literary or other inspiration did not receive any messages save those of hard work and conformity to the Victorian era's established values. Despite the era's dislike for introspection, which has been previously identified by Gilmour, Harris's autobiography is remarkably free of self-pity and promotes the era's self-improving values to the utmost. Despite my comment about the lack of negativity evident in Harris's life writing, it would seem that his writing style was enough to irritate some of his social superiors, especially as the Victorian era moved into the

Edwardian one. Sabine Baring-Gould's dismissal of Harris's writing as disingenuous and florid is indicative of one person who could have chosen to promote Harris but found what he perceives as his Romantic stylings to be both anachronistic and inadequate. Baring-Gould is symptomatic of the issues that held back critical attention on Harris. Like many other middle-class literary critics, Baring-Gould was simply unable to look beyond Harris's class status. It was not appropriate for him to possess literary aspirations as this was not the state he had been grown into. Despite all of this, there is a kernel of truth in Harris's dismissal by Baring-Gould. By being a poet and setting himself up as role model, Harris was setting up himself as an influence, no matter how conservative his values might have been. This alone needed careful managing lest Harris bit the hand that fed him, and in some delusion of aspirational grandeur attempted to have more influence than the meagre portion allowed him.

It is ironic that the 'value' of Harris's life writing to both his social superiors and his contemporaries during the Victorian era was also the intrinsic reason for his decline in relevance and popularity. As the era drew to a close and his legacy was evaluated by critics with a foot in the Edwardian age who were experiencing the stirrings of modernism, Harris was less an embodiment of a golden age and more an embarrassing, anachronistic example of it. The next chapter of this thesis examines the relationships between Harris and his supporters during the Victorian era. The dominant ideologies of the age that he reinforced are looked at in the context of the patronage he received from his social superiors. This support was predicated on Harris espousing the correct social and moral sentiments, which will now be considered in depth.

## Chapter 2: Poverty's friends are few: the ideologies of Victorian labouring-class poetics

Chapter One of this thesis considered John Harris's autobiographical writing in the context of the political and social dynamics affecting the publication of labouring-class writing in the Victorian era. It argued that the performance of humility required from labouring-class writers directly impacted on both the themes and form of their work. Sabine Baring-Gould's dislike of Harris's appropriation of figurative and Romantic stylings was discussed as being indicative of the contempt that some of Harris's reviewers had for a labouring-class writer with aspirations to be perceived as a literary one. In this chapter, I consider Harris's patrons and mentors in biographical detail, particularly concentrating on the social and political reasons they had for being advocates of Harris's work.

This chapter surveys the varying forms of patronage John Harris received. This ranged from individuals with wealth and social standing who sponsored him when his writing was in its infancy to the literary institutions and prominent individuals that provided support to him as he attempted to maintain and develop his literary career. The argument is made that Harris's patrons, whether individuals or organisations, demanded that their own values, and an echo of their moral stance, be made both implicit and explicit throughout his work. This was a prerequisite before awarding financial support and aiding publication. The first section begins by exploring the shared backgrounds of Harris and his first mentor, Dr George Smith. Smith's reasons for supporting Harris are evaluated in the context of their shared labouring-class origins. Harris's patronage in the context of the Victorian era is then explored in the second section. The processes of patronage are explained as well as the useful role submissive labouring-class writers played in reproducing the dominant values of the Victorian era for industrialists who wished to make a profit. The next part of the chapter uses primary evidence from Harris's successful applications to the Royal Literary Fund to explain how he was able to present a combination of his previous publishing

history with his current straitened financial circumstances to receive further financial support. The chapter concludes with an exploration of Harris's politics. His pacificism and support of the regeneration of mining land led to Lord Beaconsfield and Mr Gladstone securing him significant sums from the Royal Bounty Fund. By the close of this chapter, it will be evident that all of the patronage and support Harris received as a labouring-class writer was dependent on his writing's reiteration of the ideologies or political opinions of his sponsors.

### Labouring-class origins and middle-class aspirations: George Smith's support of John Harris

George Smith (1800–1868) was Harris's first patron and he was also notable for his contributions to and involvement in the industrial and religious aspects of Cornish life. Harris describes their growing acquaintance in Chapter 3 of his autobiography, entitled 'Home Life':

Through the appearance of my "First Primrose" in the Magazine, Doctor George Smith, of Camborne, came to know me, and kindly invited me to his house at Trevu. After one or two calls, I told him I should like to make an attempt at publishing, but I scarcely knew how to begin. The Doctor paced his room, and after a few turns said, "John, copy some of your best pieces, and I will submit them to my friends, and see what they will say about it." This was done, and I anxiously waited to hear the verdict of my judges. I have now forgotten all the others, except that of Doctor Etheridge, who was a genuine classical scholar and a poet. He wrote to my patron to say, "I would recommend 'The Love of Home,' and 'My Mother's Voice,' to the world. Encourage the author, and he will take his stand among the English poets." This was sufficient, and I was persuaded to collect pieces enough



together to make an eighteen-penny volume, which I dedicated to Doctor Smith, he acting for me with my printer.<sup>99</sup>

Harris's comments indicate the level of dependence he had on Smith. He knew nothing about the process of publication and remained unconvinced about the quality of the work referring to Smith's friends as 'judges'. In many ways, this was an appropriate word choice to describe them. Without their endorsements, Harris would not have been 'free' to publish his poetry which explains the 'anxiety' he felt about their responses. The 'magazine' referred to by Harris was the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, which was founded by John Wesley.

Harris's engagement with the local press was entirely typical of the labouring-class poets of the eighteenth century onwards. Kirstie Blair observes that

the relationship between the aspiring working-class poet and the newspaper press has always been crucial. Indeed, it is possible to argue that at least from the late eighteenth-century onward, every laboring class or working class poet had a significant relationship with the press.<sup>100</sup>

Harris's initial publication had two potential benefits. Publication in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine meant that he had moved beyond an 'aspiring' poet to a published one. Blair comments on the oxygenating effect of this kind of publication:

Moreover, newspaper publication was vital for drumming up patronage and subscriptions. A poet in a small rural community might, perhaps, be able to marshal

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<sup>99</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>100</sup> Kirstie Blair, 'The Newspaper Press and the Victorian Working Class Poet', in *A History of British Working Class Literature*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 264-80 (p. 266).

enough support from friends and acquaintances to form a suitable subscription list, as Burns had done.<sup>101</sup>

Harris achieved his goal of drumming up patronage as George Smith ‘came to know’ him. However, the subject of Harris’s poem also shows a level of astuteness in what he chose to submit. Blair clarifies that Harris’s title, ‘My First Primrose’ was a by no means atypical topic for a labouring-class poet:

Generically, it is possible to classify a huge mass of “original” newspaper poems as pastoral, elegy, or love poems, predominately lyrical, and, with few exceptions, written in easily recognizable verse forms with predictable patterns of rhyme and meter. These stock poems should not be lightly dismissed, since uncovering the topics that were the surest hits with newspaper editors and readers is vital to understanding what Victorian working class poets wrote and why they wrote it.<sup>102</sup>

It would seem that writing a poem on a pastoral theme was Harris’s way of effecting an introduction to potential local patrons. George Smith was a well-known Wesleyan preacher and theologian which explains his reading of the magazine. Harris spent his formative years as a Sunday School teacher and, after he moved to Falmouth at 37, he worked as a Bible Reader. Smith, like Harris, was an autodidact from a labouring-class background. He made use of his own industrious nature and improved social connections via marriage to achieve a substantial amount of material success via developments in the mining industry. Smith also had a key role in the development of the Cornwall railway.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>103</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography: Vol LIII Smith—Stanger*, ed. by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1898), pp. 38–39.

There are areas of Smith's earlier life which bear a striking similarity to Harris's. They both came from labouring-class backgrounds, and both fostered an early and sustained love of reading and religious study. Both Smith and Harris made great efforts to improve their education despite financial hardships and were committed to their chosen professions which yielded significant but differing forms of material success. Smith was born twenty years before Harris in 1800 but only two miles away. Condurrow and Bolenowe lie within the parish of Camborne and both were essentially small villages or hamlets and remain so to the present day. Like Smith's father, Harris's father was also a farmer. Smith's family were more itinerant than Harris's and Smith also received a slightly more extensive education. Similar to Harris, Smith was also in a labouring profession. In Smith's case he was a builder. However, he improved his situation by marrying Elizabeth Burrall who was his social superior. This, combined with Smith's own ingenuity, enabled him to patent the miners' safety fuse and amass his own fortune. The miners' safety fuse was a replacement for earlier and less reliable methods of igniting gunpowder blasting which had caused many deaths. The safety fuse consisted of a 'tube' of gunpowder which was surrounded by a waterproofed and varnished jute rope. The use of the rope led to an even and predictable time before detonation, saving many lives. This though, is where Smith's path departs from that of Harris who was no entrepreneur, inventor, or investor. However, the very many points of similarity in background and worldview seem to have evolved a natural sympathy between the two men and may go a long way in explaining Smith's vigorous support of Harris by facilitating the publication of his first volume of verse, enlisting subscribers to purchase the edition, chasing payments for the collection, and liaising with the printers. Smith continued to offer this level of support to Harris's subsequent poetry collections until his death.

Smith's tireless promotion of Harris was attributable to the shared religious values and beliefs they wished to promote to others. Smith was also a preacher whose liturgical

studies were significantly extensive — he had a doctorate conferred on him in 1859. When constructing their life stories both men are quick to identify their acquisition of knowledge and level of influence over their peers. Smith describes his formative education thus:

On our arrival at Falmouth my father and brother obtained employment, and I for a short time until I could do so, attended the Free School, when I was immediately placed at the head of boys as monitor general of reading. [...] On this account I soon became known among the boys by the familiar sobriquet of “ the Parson. ”<sup>104</sup>

George Smith describes his own intellectual capabilities and his capacity for leadership in his formative years in this extract. This is a theme that is sustained throughout Smith’s entire autobiography. Like Smith, Harris is also referred as a ‘parson’ in his autobiography:

When not more than twelve years old, I used frequently to repeat the rhymes I had written to my mates in the mine [...] And it was not unpleasant to me to hear them conversing to each other, while the jingle of my last lay was in their ears, “What a wonderful boy that is! he can read a book like a parson.”<sup>105</sup>

There is much of comparative interest here as well as many indicators of how each man’s self-perception subtly influences his choice of anecdotes and lexical choices. Conscious of his latter role as a leader in a professional and civic capacity, George Smith is quick to point out his early experiences of leadership amongst his peers. It is important to note that Smith uses the definite article when referring to himself as ‘the parson’ making his role seem categorical and tangible, while Harris uses the simile ‘like a parson’ to suggest a similarity whose likelihood is eroded by his presence with his peers. Harris did not achieve

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<sup>104</sup> George Smith, *The Autobiography of George Smith, LL.D. 1800-1868* (London: The Dangerfield Printing Company, 1923), p. 10.

<sup>105</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 37.

a position of professional or civic leadership. The use of the definite article by Smith and a simile by Harris go some way to explaining the relationship between the two men and their latter sense of themselves as they retroactively construct the identities of their younger selves in autobiographical writing. Smith's use of the definitive word 'the' highlights his identification of himself as someone worthy of responsibility and status even during his short time at school. He has been accorded a title by his peers which places him above them. Harris's use of figurative language serves to emphasise that his roles throughout life from itinerant preacher to miner to poet were always more facilitative than didactic. Harris's peers describing him as resembling a parson show he is one of them but just more knowledgeable. The anecdotal choices and phrasing go some way towards explaining the later relationship between the two men. Smith's peers appoint him *the* parson; Harris's peers tell him he is *like* one. Harris aspires to be a poet with a social message; Smith offers Harris the patronage and the confirmation that Harris is worthy of the title of poet, offering him support from his social superiors.

The connotations of the 'Parson' sobriquet go some way to explaining the dynamic between the supportive relationship between Smith and Harris. Smith carried out both civic work and liturgical studies facilitated by his social status. In a social position, where he was both expected and appeared to choose to do civic good in line with Christian principles, Harris must have seemed like an excellent person to support. Harris's corpus was highly religious, often bordering on the dogmatic. By patronising Harris, Smith was able to support someone who had the same desire to use his education and religious principles for the greater good. In addition to this, Smith's position of social superiority to Harris lent his actions a further element of magnanimousness. This also suggests a power dynamic between Smith and Harris where Smith is the instructor and Harris the disciple. Taking into account the twenty year age gap between the two men, this kind of relationship would be, to a certain extent, natural.

The final reason why Smith may have been so supportive of Harris was not typical of the conventional relationship of patronage, and may lie with Smith's own labouring-class origins and aspirations. It would seem that, according to his self-presentation in his autobiography, Smith was an aspiring poet as a younger man but not a materially successful one. Smith provides the following detail:

About this time Milton's "Paradise Lost" fell into my hands, and its contents were greedily devoured and became the subject of deep and earnest study. Just at this time I also tried my hand at poetry and wrote some tolerable short pieces. Aiming higher than this, I filled about half a quire of foolscap with the beginning of an epic on the progress of Ambition ! But all these a ripper judgment consigned to the flames.<sup>106</sup>

The clarity of Smith's prose might suggest that this piece of work was not as inadequate as he deemed it. It also identifies one area in which Smith failed to fully realise his goals of self-improvement despite his passion for literature. Harris was 33 when, assisted by Smith, he published his debut. Smith would have been 53. It may well have been that Smith's own ambitions were disregarded in his quest for social mobility. The impact he made in a variety of fields from industrialisation to religious studies were extensive and poetry may have been an area where he would have liked to have made a more significant impact. Therefore, it would seem that Smith's patronage of Harris also accorded him the vicarious pleasure of supporting Harris's poetry in lieu of his own literary ambitions. Indeed, a dialogue between Smith and Harris reported by Samuel Woolcock Christophers suggests that even in the infancy of their relationship Smith harboured ambitions for Harris to

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<sup>106</sup> Smith, *The Autobiography of George Smith, LL.D. 1800-1868*, p. 17.

transcend the conventions of stock poetical themes alluded to earlier in this chapter by Kirstie Blair:

One of his first lyrics was “To the First Violet,” and it is one of his best. When presenting it to his friend the late Dr. George Smith, of Camborne, the doctor, who was more of an antiquary than a poet, said, “Try something else, John; everybody writes about violets.” “That may be true,” was the reply, “but everybody who has any power of his own will have his own violet, and his own way of making love to it.” John took the doctor's advice, however, and tried something else, and never succeeded with more sweet effect than when he gives his lyrical recollections of home in “The Mother's Teaching”:<sup>107</sup>

Harris's argument here is noteworthy. First of all it shows the awareness with which he was engaging with labouring-class literary traditions. However, it also indicates Harris's sense of individualism and intention as he wants to write about the same topic as his peers but *differently*. From the perspective of patronage and influence though, it is unsurprisingly that Harris takes Smith's advice, choosing to focus on a less pastoral topic in his subsequent poem.

#### Poetry and patronage in the nineteenth century

Harris was fortunate to be supported by Smith, but patronage had been common practice for some time. In *The Industrial Muse*, Martha Vicinus explains that, while patronised poets could often be viewed as ‘literary mendicants’ in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century saw an ideological shift in attitudes towards patronage for reasons of

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<sup>107</sup> Rev. S.W. Christophers, *The Poets of Methodism* (London: Houghton & Co., 1875), p. 417.

political and economic expediency.<sup>108</sup> Vicinus clarifies that the culture shift meant that, rather than being beggars who wanted support to write poetry, nineteenth-century poets were patronised to promote specific political and economic viewpoints among their peers. She argues that,

in the nineteenth century working-class poets found greater encouragement as it became socially necessary to foster working men who accepted middle-class superiority. Everyone admired a helping hand extended to those who helped themselves, and bookish poets rarely bit back.<sup>109</sup>

As we have seen, Smith and Harris had similar backgrounds. Despite this, Smith's superior levels of material success meant that it was necessary for him to establish an acceptance of the superiority of mine and factory owners amongst the labouring-class men who contributed towards his fortune. This was because he was an industrialist who had made his substantial wealth out of factory labour. The passive and self-improving ideological messages of Harris's poetry were well matched to the dominant values of the Victorian era and of especial use to Smith and his monied, middle-class contemporaries who saw acquisition as everything and benefited from a passive and obedient workforce to support their profits. Trygve Tholfsen comments on the

total domination of mid-Victorian society and culture by a newly ascendant capitalist class: 'Everything thus tended to impress on working-class organisation in the Victorian era the mood and character dominant in Victorianism itself — a mood of acquisitiveness, which measured man by money and reckoned virtues largely in monetary terms.' [The Victorian working man] was nevertheless well

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<sup>108</sup> Vicinus, p. 168.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



integrated into a remarkably cohesive culture — a tightly knit structure of values, institutions, roles and ritual — built on a social base dominated by the middle classes.<sup>110</sup>

Although Tholfsen does not explicitly comment on the passivity required of a labouring-class workforce, the power dynamic between the capitalist middle classes who measured everything by monetary gain and their domination of the values, roles, and rituals that constituted the social base of the labouring classes showed the level of strict control under which they were held by their social superiors. Therefore, Smith and Harris's relationship seems to be quite typical within the context of Victorian class dynamics and patronage.

Vicinus says that usually for a poet,

In the early stages of his career the sponsor found a publisher, corrected his grammar and helped get up a subscription list [...] Elevated by a wealthy sponsor, the poet usually felt he had to represent himself and his beliefs in the best possible light both to those above and below him.<sup>111</sup>

Vicinus reinforces the importance of representing 'beliefs in the best possible light' to those 'above and below' which reinforces the double bind placed on labouring-class writers like Harris. They had to present a value set which would appeal to their patron. This appeal had little to do with linguistic or technical ability and was more focused on whether they were likely to be a significant and useful influence on their contemporaries.

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<sup>110</sup> Trygve Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1976; repr. 2020), pp. 11-12.

<sup>111</sup> Vicinus, p. 171.

The middle-class values that were inculcated into the labouring classes are embodied in Samuel Smiles' 1859 book, *Self-Help*. This was an extraordinarily popular book which Kenneth Fielden identifies as having sold 'a quarter of a million copies by 1905' and which appeared in every European tongue including Albanian. Fielden cites an example of 'one man [who] actually wrote to Smiles saying he regularly opened *Self-Help* at random, as some did the Bible, when in difficulties.'<sup>112</sup> Smiles uses biographical examples of people who had achieved great things due to their untiring labour, believing this would inspire others to do the same. One example cited in the book is the poor potter Bernard Palissy who sacrificed his own furniture to create the furnace needed for his enamelware. Eventually, he became a potter for the French aristocracy.<sup>113</sup> However, Anne Baltz Rodrick argues that, although 'inspiration' was the ostensibly main aim of the book, its ideological stance was more important. She says,

*Self-Help* did not inspire the struggles of young men attempting to appropriate models of cultural behavior. What it did do was to express, publicly and to a national audience, the virtues of those engaged in the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties. Further, the model Smiles described bound self-improvement inextricably to active participation in civic society, elaborating the centrality of informed debate to mid-Victorian public life. Mutual self-improvement and the concurrent participation in this culture of debate not only demonstrated moral worth but also became the primary marker of a new model of popular citizenship, divorced from the traditional exclusionary overtones of political suffrage and therefore available to thousands whose aspirations toward culture transcended class lines.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Fielden, 'Samuel Smiles and Self Help', *Victorian Studies*, 12 (1968), 155-76 (pp. 158-59).

<sup>113</sup> Tom Butler-Bowden, 'Self Help Classics', *50 Classics Series: Expand Your Mind*, (2023), <<http://www.butler-bowdon.com/samuel-smiles---self-help.html>> [accessed 3 December 2023]

<sup>114</sup> Baltz Rodrick, p. 39.

Baltz Roderick's comments are particularly applicable to both Smith and Harris. Harris received a similarly limited education but was sufficiently civic minded to devote his spare time to Sunday School teaching.<sup>115</sup> In his autobiography he highlights his approaches to self-improvement which he interlinked with what he perceived to be his civic duties:

When about sixteen, I became a teacher in the [Sunday] school, and rose from one post to another until I filled the office of librarian. Though my week days were so busily and so hardly occupied, I felt it to be my duty to devote the Sabbath to the service of the Master. So I soon became connected with two schools, being superintendent of one at Black Rock, which was in the midst of a barren moor, in the parish of Crowan, about two miles from my Troon-Moor home. It was a very uncultivated district, with scarcely a green meadow to be seen from the little chapel-door ; and morally and intellectually it was no better—boys and girls in their teens not knowing the letters of the alphabet. In addition to these morning and afternoon duties, I frequently had to preach twice on a Sunday, finishing my labours about ten o'clock at night. This course of rather severe Sabbath discipline was cheerfully pursued almost up to the time that I became a Scripture Reader at Falmouth, in August, 1857.<sup>116</sup>

Harris uses this extract from his autobiography to suggest that his obligations to support Godly behaviour in his peers as well as developing their literacy was a keen focus of his spare time. What Baltz Roderick refers to previously as 'moral worth' is established by Harris as he attempts to support morally and culturally lacking younger people by teaching them religion as well as the literacy skills required to engage more fully with the Bible. In

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<sup>115</sup> Newman, p. 17.

<sup>116</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 21.

terms of what Baltz Roderick refers to as ‘the virtues of those engaged in the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties’, Harris refers to his ‘severe Sabbath discipline’ as ‘cheerfully pursued’. This suggests that his level of industry was conducive to a positive mindset as opposed to a stressful one. Harris carefully concludes this paragraph with an implicit moral, noting that he maintained this civic, self-improving behaviour until he was able to gain better employment. His intention here being to make the association with hard work and material achievement.

However, Harris’s approach to his civic duty was essentially parochial; Smith’s intentions were more far reaching. To participate more actively in Victorian public life and achieve more influence, it was important for Smith to support Harris to further his own social mobility. Harris was an excellent conduit to help Smith achieve this purpose as he was an excellent role model and could have been used to influence fellow labouring-class men. As someone from a labouring-class background, these were qualities that Smith could instantly recognise. Harris’s commitment to self-improvement seemed interlinked with civic mindedness in both his actions and his poetry. By sponsoring Harris’s debut collection of poems, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, Smith was able to promote someone whose values carefully corresponded with his own. He was also able to show himself as civic minded as, just like Harris’s teaching at Sunday Schools, Smith was helping someone less fortunate than himself and advancing his own social position.

Smith’s support of Harris’s debut collection was effective. The collection sold out its first print run and was revised and re-printed in a second edition. Harris details Smith’s role in supporting this process in his autobiography observing that ‘the Doctor [George Smith] prepared a written prospectus for me, and several of the gentry in the neighbourhood

subscribed to the work.’<sup>117</sup> The approach Smith used to promote Harris’s work was commonly known as the subscription model, described by Barbara M. Benedict as a

contract between selected readers, and an author and a publisher. By this plan, interested readers, attracted by the description of a proposed new work, would provide the means to pay for its publication, and would eventually receive one of the limited number of copies themselves.<sup>118</sup>

Smith produced a written prospectus which he used in conjunction with his relationships and influence to gather subscribers to Harris’s debut collection. No copy of the prospectus is extant but the purpose of the nineteenth-century prospectus is clarified by David Duff:

Prospectuses played a key role in subscription publishing [...] Typically, a prospectus described both the intellectual content of the work and the physical form of it, explaining the rationale for publication and offering information about format, typeface, paper quality, binding (if used), pricing, where the order could be placed, and how and when it would be delivered, these transactional details often appearing in a sub-headed ‘Conditions of Sale’ section. Sometimes one or more specimen pages were included and the prospectus was printed in the same format as the work it announced, making it a physical sample of the work as well as an abstract description of it.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 74.

<sup>118</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, ‘Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830*, ed. by Thomas Keymer and John Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 3-23 (p. 9).

<sup>119</sup> David Duff, ‘The Book to Come: Literary Advertising and the Poetics of the Prospectus’, in *Forms, Formats and the Circulation of Knowledge: British Printscape’s Innovations, 1688–1832*, ed. by Louisiane Ferlier and Bénédicte Miyamoto (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 229-252 (p. 229).

This would suggest that, as Smith had written a prospectus for Harris, his role in supporting him was extensive as he would have advised or discussed with him a great deal of specific details about the production of Harris's debut volume. With Smith's previous experience in industrial manufacture, he was extremely well placed to advise Harris on the technicalities of typeface and paper quality. He would have also possessed the business sense to ensure that Harris would have been able to garner some profit from the enterprise or at least not end up in a position where he was poorer than he started. Once Smith had piqued the interest among people with the requisite money, status, and connections, the work could then be published.

Smith's role in this process was critical for Harris in terms of achieving publication as well as the approval of Harris's local social superiors. One of them was 'Mr. John Budge, who pronounced my sonnet to the lark to be equal to Wordsworth'.<sup>120</sup> John Budge is described by Paul Newman as Harris's old friend and a Quaker and appears to be someone who had a significant influence on Harris.<sup>121</sup> Budge was a published writer on religious topics who produced a pamphlet entitled, *Some Observations Principally on the Subject of Religious Worship*. This was initially printed by the London branch of The Society of Friends.<sup>122</sup> The pamphlet gives us an indication about Budge's attitudes and beliefs:

Man, as he stands alienated from God, is not merely prone to evil, but is essentially evil—evil is his element, and the commission of evil is at all times within his power ; not so, good—this springs only from the source and fountain of good—is

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<sup>120</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 74.

<sup>121</sup> Newman, p. 64.

<sup>122</sup> Joseph Smith, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books, or Books Written By Members of the Society of Friends, Commonly called Quakers, From their First Rise to the Present Time, 2 vols.*, (London: Joseph Smith, 1867), I, p. 109.

not within man's reach, otherwise, than as it is freely and graciously  
communicated.<sup>123</sup>

Budge's attitude here is that mankind's natural disposition is evil and only from divine means can he attain any sense of grace. This would then explain his positivity about Harris's poem about the lark which praised the elevating power of the God-created natural world. The poem concludes,

To drink thy mellow music. Power is thine,  
Beloved minstrel, with thy matin hymn,  
(Stole from the chimings of the cherubim,)  
To raise my thoughts above earth's dusty line !<sup>124</sup>

Much of Harris's sentiment that only mankind can elevate God would seem to correlate with Budge's religious convictions. At the conclusion of this poem, it is only the power of the God created lark that is able to raise Harris thoughts above 'earth's dusty line'. Religious language is also used here. Although a literary reference to bird song, Harris is also referring to the Christian service of morning prayer in Anglican worship. Budge's perception of mankind's natural state of original sin also ran to sternly advising Harris against other styles of writing such as satire. Paul Newman observes that,

Even during his youthful phase of creation, [Harris] only wrote two satirical poems [...] His second piece concerned a dentist, "who had the hardihood to jerk out two of my teeth at a twitch, and one of them quite sound." Harris loaned the poem to a

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<sup>123</sup> John Budge, *Some Observations Principally on the Subject of Religious Worship* (London: Tract Association of the Society of Friends, 1855), p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, p. 115.

Quaker of Camborne, possibly John Budge, who read it and returned it, saying,

“John Harris, I advise thee to put that piece in between the bars of the grate.”<sup>125</sup>

Budge’s perception that mankind was intrinsically evil must have been confirmed when he read this piece by Harris. It is likely that Budge would have taken a dim view of Harris mocking a man of medicine who was trying to help him whatever the unintended consequences. It would appear that, other than this satirical piece, Budge remained a strong supporter of Harris’s work, especially in the earlier stages of his writing career. The opening pages of *The Lands’ End, Kynance Cove, and other Poems* contain a list of subscribers where John Budge is identified as having ordered ten copies of the collection.<sup>126</sup> It would seem likely that buying several copies of Harris’s book was Budge’s way of both offering financial support to him as well as enabling him to promote it to others by giving it away.

Despite the support offered by George Smith and John Budge to Harris’s poetic aspirations, some prominent members of the local community were not so supportive. This was especially the case when they were mine and factory owners attempting to maximise profits from their labouring-class workforce. Many could not even countenance the *aspiration* of a labouring class man to be a poet. This was because, in their estimation, it was the habit of the workshy who were trying to place themselves into the higher echelons of society rather than conforming to what was expected of them. In *My Autobiography*, Harris comments on one such mine owner:

Captain Charles Thomas [...] strove to help me, by showing the book [Harris’s debut collection] to one of the richest adventurers in the mine, who gained his

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<sup>125</sup> Newman, pp. 19-20.

<sup>126</sup> John Harris, *The Land’s End, Kynance Cove, and other Poems* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1858) p. vii.



thousands a year through the excessive toil of the poor men. It was told me afterwards that he took up the volume, turned it round, flung it upon the account-house table, and exclaimed, “Let him work on, let him work on,” wounding me to tears.<sup>127</sup>

Captain Charles Thomas was another supporter of Harris; he ordered ten copies of *The Land’s End, Kynance Cove, and other Poems*.<sup>128</sup> Despite his promotion of Harris, he was unable to secure Harris any kind of support or relief from those highest up on the industrial ladder and therefore likely to make the most profit. Harris refers to being ‘wounded to tears’. This hyperbolic phrase, which is not typical, shows he must have felt the lack of support very keenly as his ability at poetry was one of the few ways in which he could achieve any kind of social mobility. Vicinus explains the era’s general distaste towards this attitude commenting on the importance of avoiding ‘the imputation of being a social climber, even if this were the intention’.<sup>129</sup> It is unclear what Captain Charles Thomas asked the mine owner for specifically but it is clear that the mine owner’s phrase ‘let him work on, let him work on’ suggests implicitly that the sole outcome of patronising Harris would be to diminish his capacity as a productive employee. It must have been quite satisfying to Harris that, despite the responses of this particular ‘adventurer’, his first volume sold out.

Despite the setbacks, Smith’s considerable status meant that he was able to promote Harris’s work to people who would not otherwise have given Harris an audience due to his status as a labouring man. Nigel Cross argues that,

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<sup>127</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 74.

<sup>128</sup> Harris, *The Land’s End, Kynance Cove and other Poems*, p. vii.

<sup>129</sup> Vicinus, p. 172.

They [labouring-class writers] wanted the approbation of a middle-class readership for whom working-class politics were anathema. [...]The history of these working-class writers is a relatively dismal catalogue of inadequate and cavalier patronage, groundless optimism and commercial failure. Such failure had little to do with lack of talent. Many self-educated writers were as talented as their middle-class colleagues. Yet almost no working-class writer achieved financial independence through the practice of authorship. The literary world had evolved to cater for the taste of the leisured classes which patently excluded the working man.<sup>130</sup>

Earlier in this chapter, Tholfsen refers to the fact that the ‘social base [was] dominated by the middle classes’.<sup>131</sup> This meant that the interactions, ideologies, and values of the middle classes dominated labouring-class lives. For Harris, this meant that his central literary appeal to them was his subservience where he outlined his uncomplaining attitude towards hard work which supported their profiteering. In terms of insight, he had none to offer them; his patronage was dependent on pleasing them and his aspirations were to be like them. Due to being their social inferior, he was not able to offer them any kind of critique they might accept as he was their dependant rather than their equal. Thus, he had no real voice other than one that imitated established ideas and values.

#### Labouring-class poetics and literary taste

The work of labouring-class poets was essentially a curate’s egg for many of their middle-class supporters. As literature and the literary establishment were essentially the preserve of the more affluent middle-classes, they could only expect to see some passable iterations of what they had already created from the poorer writers whom they chose to support.

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<sup>130</sup> Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 126.

<sup>131</sup> Tholfsen, pp. 11-12.

Their notion of what constituted literature was not co-constructed or one that was open to debate. The sociological aspect in the creation of contemporary literary taste is emphasised by Pierre Bourdieu:

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate.<sup>132</sup>

Bourdieu's observation is as relevant in the nineteenth century as it was in the one he was writing in. The sociological conditions of literary production in the Victorian era were dominated by the middle classes and focused on their life experiences which were either leisure orientated, professionally focused, or managerial. They may have been a combination of all three but they did not include hard rock mining. Imaginative fiction is speculative but it is also materially based on life experiences. It would never occur to Harris to consider certain topics as he either would not have experienced them or they would not seem important to him due to his severe lack of leisure time. If labouring-class writers were to write in a middle-class literary style they needed the opportunity to gain these experiences when not in direct employment.

A cursory glance through Harris's debut collection reveals much that would not correspond with middle-class experiences. The introduction to the second long poem, 'Christian Heroism' contains extensive technical detail about mining processes. It details

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<sup>132</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984; repr. 1996), p. 1.

how two miners were working and one lit a fuse too early. They both jumped into the bucket (a form of lift) to escape but only one could be lifted so the man who did not light the fuse sacrificed himself:

Their proper course would have been to cut the fuse to its necessary length, before placing it in the hole ; then one should have ascended in the bucket, and the other should have waited till the bucket came down again, fired the touch-paper placed under the fuse, which would soon ignite it, given the signal, and so have ascended to the top of the shaft before the explosion. In the present case, however, they negligently cut the fuse with a stone and one of their blunt iron drills. Fire was struck; the fuse was ignited ; they both dashed to the bucket, and gave the signal. The man above attempted in vain to move the windlass : one could escape,—both could not,—and delay was death to both. It is the general custom for the miner who attends to the charging of the hole, to wait behind and fire it. It was our hero's turn to have ascended ; and his comrade, who had charged the hole, should have remained behind and fired it. But, looking for a moment at his mate, and stepping from the bucket, he said, “Escape ; I shall be in heaven in a minute !”<sup>133</sup>

The tone of the introduction is pragmatic and, although its central premise is dramatic and exciting, it makes no use of figurative or literary language often typical of imaginative writing. The proliferation of semi-colons, em dashes, and commas reinforce the sequential and ordered nature of the work Harris is carrying out. This is closer to a newspaper report than fictionalised writing which can be high on excitement and low on technical accuracy. Furthermore, the use of technical language in this introduction belies Harris’s labouring-class origins. Words such as ‘windlass’ are specific to mining referring in this case to an apparatus used for moving heavy weights. Although the drama, insight into labouring-class

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<sup>133</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, p. 33.

life, and Christian moral of the anecdote might have been appealing to its middle-class audience, Harris's anecdote is not particularly relatable to people working in a professional capacity or the leisured classes. In some instances, it might have been that some prospective middle-class readers would have been responsible either directly or indirectly for the death of his colleague due to their investments in mining.

Whatever levels of relatability and entertainment Harris's occupation offered for his middle-class readership, he experienced difficulties in sustaining his audience's interest once he began writing on more general themes that could potentially appeal to a wider audience. His struggles with publication became more apparent after Smith's passing. Smith's death occurred after Harris had reached what might have been described as the high point of his career: the winning of the Shakespeare Tercentenary Prize in 1864. Harris says the following in his autobiography:

In 1866, I published "Shakespeare's Shrine, an Indian Story, Essays and Poems; and in 1868, "Luda, a Lay of the Druids, Hymns, Tales, Essays, and Legends." Up to this time Doctor Smith acted for me with my London printer, I collecting the money from my subscribers, and he forwarding it : and about this time he died. The Doctor's kindness was a relief to me, as I could take my own time about it. But to get subscribers, what a tug ! what a battle with the Fates ! what excuses ! what refusals ! what disdains ! And a positive objection to patronize my pieces cut me like a thrice-sharpened sword. Often has my heart been more heavy than I can express, when the wealthy have turned their backs upon me, declining to take a single 2/6 copy of my works. O, anything, anything else but a poor poet and his books ! "Nobody reads your poems," said one of our proud people to me ; and without giving a cheerful order, stalked off to his dinner of roast.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 89-90.

Harris stopped writing about mining in any specific detail after his third volume *The Mountain Prophet, The Mine and other Poems* (1860). At this point Harris was 40 years old and had been working as a Scripture Reader in Falmouth since the August of 1857.<sup>135</sup> *Shakespeare's Shrine* is a more miscellaneous collection featuring tributes to William Shakespeare and other general topics. *Luda, A Lay of the Druids* contains a long poem featuring some romanticised descriptions of druids and a battle at Carn Brea. None of these collections bear much relationship to Harris's mining origins which gained him so much attention in the first place. The sheer challenges of gaining subscribers without Smith's support is rendered in more hyperbolic terms than is typical in Harris's autobiography. The repeated plosive sound of 'poor poet' and 'proud people' gives an indication of the level of aggression he experienced when trying to sell his books; this citation rather casts Harris as a mendicant than a writer of some literary reputation. This must have been extremely humiliating and it is a tribute to his belief in the value of his own work that he persisted in publishing books. Paul Newman confirms the efforts that George Smith had made on Harris's behalf, explaining that Harris's poetry 'made a deep impression on him [George Smith] and fired him to undertake a long-term enterprise which was to cost him much time and effort.'<sup>136</sup> The challenging truth of this statement is that, although unkind, the anonymous member of the wealthy identified here is probably not inaccurate in his observation that nobody read Harris's poetry. Although people may have bought Harris's poems to sponsor him as a good role model to his peers, whether they read them at all is another matter entirely. Although Harris's sponsors hoped he would influence his labouring-class peers, it is unlikely that they would have necessarily read his poetry collections. Kirstie Blair comments that:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>136</sup> Newman, p. 55.

In Victorian studies, book collections are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to assessing the influence of working class poetics. Working class readers were not, on the whole, reading these books. They were reading and discussing the poetry columns and then cutting their favorite poems out of newspaper columns and pasting them into scrapbooks or on the walls of their workplace.<sup>137</sup>

Blair's observations are axiomatic when considered from a financial perspective. Although he was probably known to his labouring-class peers as a poet, buying Harris's books would have been out of their financial reach and their engagement would have been limited to what they could afford to engage with. Therefore, much of Harris's readership is hard to define and it becomes increasingly apparent that Smith's passing had a distinct impact on the number of poetry books Harris was able to sell. The fact that George Smith was prepared to endure the 'tugs', 'excuses', and 'refusals' that came with promoting Harris's work or indeed did not have to endure them due to his superior social and economic status meant that he was able to sell his books from the perspective of charitable support rather than literary edification.

Nigel Cross confirms that payment for labouring-class writers was dependent on social status rather than ability:

Literary society regarded most working-class writers of any merit as entertaining freaks — shoe making one moment and verse-making the next. They could not hope to compete with educated writers, not least because they were often paid by publishers according to their station rather than their abilities.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Blair, 'The Newspaper Press and the Victorian Working Class Poet', p. 279.

<sup>138</sup> Cross, p. 133.

Even those extremely rare labouring-class writers feted by labouring-class society usually ended up in what Cross previously termed ‘commercial failure’.<sup>139</sup> Smith’s involvement on Harris’s behalf meant that he had the requisite skills and knowledge to promote Harris. Although there is no direct primary evidence that Smith stopped Harris from getting into debt, the extent to which he supported Harris’s career was clearly far reaching.

### Funding in Victorian times

The previous section of this chapter established that patrons often facilitated labouring-class writers’ first attempts at publication. However, much of this patronage was inconsistent and did not result in commercial success for the writer. In this context, Harris was lucky but, even if the patron was supportive, as Smith had been for Harris, the sponsor’s death meant that labouring-class writers were often left with a taste of success but no means of sustaining their careers.<sup>140</sup> Smith’s death in 1866 was the probable cause of Harris’s 1872 application to the Royal Literary Fund. In it, Harris alludes to his privations when attempting to write poetry as a younger man:

[M]y father took me with him to labour in the interior of a Cornish copper mine. Here my exertions and privations were most severe, often working in the smoke and darkness from morning till night, and from night till morning.<sup>141</sup>

Harris’s use of antimetabole in the last sentence emphasises the length of his working hours. Harris was lucky. At the age of 37, he was appointed as a Scripture Reader in

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872. Available at: British Library reference number: Loan 96 RLF 1/1900/2.



Falmouth which allowed him the reduced working hours required to further facilitate his writing.

The 1872 application was one of several John Harris made to the Royal Literary Fund throughout his lifetime. It is interesting to note that two of Harris's more successful applications were after George Smith's death, in 1868. The first was a grant of fifty pounds in 1872.<sup>142</sup> Harris made a further application and received a further fifty pounds in 1876.<sup>143</sup> The 1872 application indicated that 1000 copies of the first two editions of his debut collection *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* were produced. The first edition sold out which then explained the reprint. After this, *The Lands' End, Kynance Cove, and other Poems, The Mountain Prophet, the Mine and other Poems, A Story of Carn Brea, Essays, and Poems, An Ode on the Anniversary of William Shakespeare, Shakspeare's Shrine, An Indian Story, Essays and Poems* received a print run of 1000 copies.<sup>144</sup> It is not quite clear from Harris's account whether Smith passed away before his publication of *Luda: A Lay of the Druids, Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends* but this edition received a print run of 750 copies as did the subsequent volume *Bulo; Reuben Ross, A Tale of the Manacles, Hymn, Song and Story*. The final edition to be listed on the Royal Literary Fund is *The Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems* which received the even more limited run of 500 copies.<sup>145</sup>

Speaking about the Royal Literary Fund, K. J. Fielding notes that,

The Royal Literary Fund was a society which had been founded by the Rev. David Williams, about 1790, 'for the protection and relief of persons of genius and

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<sup>142</sup> John Harris, *Application Form*, 18 Oct 1872.

<sup>143</sup> John Harris, *Application Form*, 6 April 1876. Available at: British Library reference number: Loan 96 RLF 1/1900/20.

<sup>144</sup> John Harris, *Application Form*, 18 Oct 1872.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

learning, or their families, who shall be in want', and more especially for the authors of published works.<sup>146</sup>

The Royal Literary Fund's initial criteria does not prescribe critical reception or review as part of its mission statement. Its reference to 'persons of genius or learning' can only be judged subjectively, presumably by the members of the fund's committee. The fund's especial focus on 'published works' does not take into account that achieving publication was not necessarily a mark of critical distinction. Labouring-class writers in particular often published using the subscription model meaning that they had to gain a commitment to their works before going to print. Often labouring-class poets had an advocate, like Harris did with George Smith, but this did not necessitate them having any literary ability whatsoever.

The fund's ambivalence to supporting the creation of great works of art was of concern to many people. Nigel Cross discusses the poet and critic most famous for his poem, *Orion*, Richard Henry Horne (1802–1844) who made the following criticism of the fund in 1833:

He [R.H. Horne] asked two questions: 'Has its bounty ever enabled man to bring forth a fine tragedy, epic, history, novel or work of science? How many men of genius has it relieved from distress?' The answer to the first question was that it was never the object of the Fund to sponsor a literary work.<sup>147</sup>

Despite these criticisms, the original intentions of the fund were radical and challenged the idea of patronage as a concept although this extreme ideology quickly dissipated. Kevin Binfield and William Christmas observe that,

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<sup>146</sup> K.J. Fielding, 'Dickens and the Royal Literary Fund—1876', *The Review of English Studies*, 6 (1955), 383-394 (p. 384).

<sup>147</sup> Cross, pp. 26-27.

Williams [the originator of the fund] was opposed to the interclass patronage system, writing, “Patronage is the price of an unfortunate man’s liberty; it is the prerogative of insolence and outrage; it is despotic sovereignty over an abject dependent, whose abuses are, to the last degree, humiliating and oppressive” [...] Williams was censured for such comments, and the fund, because of its bureaucracy and the sense of its “role as a gatekeeper of high culture, ... reverted to patronage in a dismaying familiar form by the early 1800s”.<sup>148</sup>

The early beneficiaries of the Royal Literary Fund tended to include those experiencing hardship whose writing contained themes of moral rectitude but were also sympathetic to Williams’s radical politics. The first beneficiary of the fund in 1790 was a Dr. Edward Harwood who, according to Cross,

was a Dissenting minister and the author of *Cheerful Thoughts on the Happiness of a Religious Life* among other religious works, and some indifferent classical translations. His contributions to biblical scholarship were said to be learned and he was a friend and champion of Joseph Priestley. He had been paralysed and bedridden for eight years and had no private resources. [...] It must have pleased David Williams that the first successful applicant was a Dissenter and friend to radicals.<sup>149</sup>

However, despite Williams’s more radical intentions, the fund soon morphed into what Cross describes as having an ‘apolitical character with a firm emphasis on blameless

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<sup>148</sup> Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas, ‘Introduction’, in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by William J. Christmas and Kevin Binfield (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018), pp. 1-24 (p. 16).

<sup>149</sup> Cross, pp. 14-15.

philanthropy.<sup>150</sup> Due to the fickleness of the subscription model, the increasing apolitical nature of the fund was of great value to labouring-class writers.

One of Harris's literary inspirations, the farmer poet, Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823) was a very needy beneficent of the organisation in 1801. Cross provides the specifics:

A less dramatic, but typical example of the Literary Fund's usefulness was when the ageing Robert Bloomfield was granted a total of £90. Bloomfield had been the most patronised poet of his time [...] In 1818 the rage for Bloomfield had evaporated, and he was left, destitute and half-blind, to apply to the Literary Fund. He was given a £40 grant.<sup>151</sup>

Bloomfield's experience here is a more extreme example of Harris's experience when he lost the support and patronage of George Smith. There seems to be a pattern of publication with labouring-class poetics which follows an initial path of success via patronage and a moment of being fashionable which then rapidly subsides to obscurity and dependence on charities such as the Literary Fund. It is perhaps worth remembering that Harris's greatest successes were also earlier in his career although he never reached Bloomfield's level of difficulties. It is interesting to consider that Newman does not seem to perceive that Harris's fluctuating fortunes were relatively typical of the experience of these men. They were only ever a novelty to the literary establishment and, like all novelties, their appeal soon palled.

As has been established, the Royal Literary Fund placed especial emphasis on a writer's published works no matter what their origin. Harris was in an excellent position when he

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

completed his 1872 application for support as he had already published several volumes with print runs numbering around a thousand per volume. The emphasis the fund placed on publication is reinforced in its application form which asks for cursory personal information and then includes a large printed space for publications. There is no space on the form for a personal appeal or an explanation of why the support was required.

Despite this, the British Library's copy of Harris's application form for the 1872 grant is accompanied by an extensive document headed 'Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund'.<sup>152</sup> The document reproduced below is a scanned copy of Harris's application which is held on file by the British Library in their archives section for the Royal Literary Fund. It is reproduced with permission from both organisations:

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<sup>152</sup> John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872.

November 13 '72

Amount of Grant £ 35. --

D. B. Dome Registrar (1)

ROYAL LITERARY FUND.

Form of Application for an Author.

Christian name and surname of the Applicant in words at length.	John Harris
Profession, University or other titles.	Bible Reader
Age, Date and Place of Birth.	52. Born October 14, 1820, on Bolemore Hill, Camborne, Cornwall
Present Residence.	Killigrew Terrace, Zalmouth
Whether single or married; and if married, or having been so, and having a family, the number, respective ages, and circumstances of the children.	Married, wife alive. 3 children living — a married daughter aged 25, a son 15, pupil teacher with no salary, and a son at school aged 13. This son is very delicate with spinal complaint.
If relieved before by the Royal Literary Fund; and if so, how often, and to what amount on each occasion.	Have had no previous relief from this Fund
Present means and sources of income, whether from Salary, Annuity, Pension, or other kind of provision; and the amount thereof.	£ 70 per annum as Bible Reader

TITLES OF PUBLISHED WORKS, in full.

\*\* In the case of an Application founded on Contributions to Periodical Literature, the Titles of the Articles must be given, together with the Names, Dates, and Places of Publication of the Periodicals in which they appeared. See Schedule in the next page.

Title of Work	No. of Vols.	Size.	Place of Publication.	Date of Publication.
Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain . . . . .	1000	7cap 8vo	London	October 1, 1853
Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain. Second edition, with several additional Poems . . . . .	1000	7cap 8vo	London	April 25, 1856
The Land's End, Scynance Cove, and other Poems . . . . .	1000	7cap 8vo	London	September 30, 1858
The Mountain Prophet, the Mine, and other Poems . . . . .	1000	7cap 8vo	London	September 22, 1860

Dated this 18 day of October 1872

(Signature of Applicant.) John Harris

[v.o.]

CONTRIBUTIONS TO PERIODICALS.					
NAME OF PERIODICAL	TITLES OF ARTICLES.			DATE	
	A Story of Carn Brea Epics, and Poems . . .	No. of vols 1000	Size 2cath 8vo	Place of publication London	March 10, 1863
	An Ode on the Anniversary of William Shakspeare. First Prize Poem . . . . .	1000	Pamphlet 3m	Country	April 24, 1864
	Shakspeare's Shrine, An Indian Story, Epics and Poems . . . . .	1000	2cath 8vo	London	September 1866
	Juda: A Lay of the Druids Hymns, Tales, Epics, and Legends . . . . .	750	2cath 8vo	London	October 14 1868
	Bulo; Reuben Rops, A Tale of The Manacles. Hymn, Song and Story . . . . .	750	2cath 8vo	London	September 1871
	The Cruise of the Cutler and other Peace Poems . . . . . (out of print)	500	2cath 8vo	London	1872

John Harris, *Application Form*, 18 Oct 1872.

The document was titled 'Form of Application for an Author'. After a series of cursory questions, it established whether Harris had been a previous recipient of the fund and asked about his yearly income. The final and main section of the form is concerned with Harris's publication history. Details of the number of volumes as well as place and date of publication were required to establish the extent to which Harris could be considered a published author. Harris also accompanied his application form with a covering letter which is reproduced on the following pages.



Items connected with the Application  
for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund.  
To the Committee.  
Gentlemen.

I was the eldest child of my parents,  
and born in the parish of Camborne, Cornwall,  
October 14, 1820. My father was a miner,  
who also held a small farm on the side of  
a hill called Bolennowe. I was taught to  
read by an aged woman in the village,  
and was fond of books from a child. When  
only nine years old, I was taken off from  
school and put to work in the fields; and  
four years latter my father took me with  
him to labour in the interior of a Cornish  
copper mine. Here my exertions and  
privations were most severe, often  
working in the smoke and darkness from  
morning till night, and from night till  
morning. And here I continued from my  
thirteenth untill my Thirty-seventh year,  
when I was engaged in the situation I now  
fill. But I pursued my studies during  
every fragment of leisure, and also attended

a Sunday school in the neighbourhood, which served in a great measure to strengthen my love for literature. I owe, too, very much to my mother, who still lives.

I began to write verses at an early age — how early I can scarcely remember. I recollect writing them on the clean side of cast-off tea-papers, which my mother bought from the shop, and then reading them to my excited playfellows with great delight. Feeling the passion for poetry, I pursued it with unflinching zest amid disadvantages greater than I can name. My father's barn and cow-house were often my study; and I wandered the fields and rocky carns to write my simple lays. I stole away from my companions, choosing much to be alone, that I might learn of Nature. I have often written lines of verse on my thumb-nails, or on fragments of roof-slate, or shreds of

common tile picked up on the road, or  
on the crown of my hat, and on iron  
wedges when working far underground.  
I did this for fear I should not retain  
the thought in my memory. It has been  
no unusual thing, later on in life, to see  
my verses with my infant children  
sitting on my knees. In the midst of  
a life of toil one object has been before  
me, and that object has been the composition  
of song; and I can conscientiously say  
that for it I have not omitted one  
single social duty.

At the Tercentenary of Shakespeare,  
April, 1864, the first prize was awarded  
to me by the Right Hon. Lord Lyttelton, and  
other adjudicators, for the best poem on the  
occasion, which was competed for not  
only by the United Kingdom but also  
by America.

I have the old story to repeat, that

the publication of my books has not left me  
scarcely any pecuniary profit; and it has been  
no difficult task to make the octavo volumes  
pay. I have long had a severe struggle to  
support my rising family. My present  
salary as Bible reader is £70 pounds  
per annum. My health is now feeble;  
and I earnestly appeal for that help  
which you are empowered to bestow.

② October, 1872. John Harris,  
Falmouth.

P.S. All my works have been published  
by subscription; and I am only deterred  
from issuing them in a collected form  
through stunted means. For a fuller  
account of my career, see introduction  
to *A Story of Carn Brea* now sent  
you.

John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872.

The application demonstrates a very clear understanding of the Fund's additional criteria for a successful application: 'persons of genius or learning' or 'their families, who shall be in want'. Harris's representation of himself here is one of 'humble distinction'. He portrays himself as a poor but industrious labouring man as well as a poet of some ability. Harris identifies his modest background and his love of literature, commenting, 'I was taught to read by an aged woman in the village, I was fond of books from a child.' After this opening, Harris goes on to describe his work ethic in superhuman terms juxtaposing his 'privations' down the mine which were 'most severe' from his 'thirteenth' to his 'thirty-seventh year'. This displays to his middle-class readership that, first and foremost, he knows his place in society. He then follows this with his love for poetry which then seems inconceivable in such a challenging situation and goes on to reinforce how unusual he is as a labouring-class man. He comments, 'I began to write verses at an early age — how early I can scarcely remember.' Harris's way of demonstrating that his ability to write verse from such a young age shows how preternaturally gifted he is. His subsequent description of writing lines of verse on his thumb nails and on roof slates displays both his insuperable poverty but also emphasises his commitment to poetry. The reference to 'fragments of roofslate' suggests that the leisure time he is afforded is so minute as to be infinitesimal and yet he is still the author of several volumes of poetry and capable of writing an articulate letter.<sup>153</sup> The use of an em dash shows that Harris has been writing poetry for so long that he cannot remember a time when he was not doing it. This connotes the sense that his ability was precocious. Although it may seem affected to a modern-day audience, much of this material, and even some of the phraseology used in this application letter, can be found in the autobiographical sketches in Harris's poetry collections and then in a more expanded form in his autobiography. This unusual anecdote also separated him from other applicants in its unusually dedicated qualities. Harris narrativizes his recognition for these

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<sup>153</sup> John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872.

efforts with his documentation winning the Shakespeare Tercentenary Prize in 1864. David Wright explains that the purpose and value of literary prizes is,

[to] use Bourdieu's terms, evidence of the heteronomization of pure and disinterested notions of literary value, prizes provide key information to consumers, again filtered through the professional judgment of a panel of experts, in navigating their way through the myriad of new and available titles.<sup>154</sup>

By describing his awarding of the prize, near the end of his letter, Harris is able to reinforce the material recognition he has achieved from middle-class tastemakers as to the value of his writing. The implication of his statement is that he has the specific endorsement of his social superiors. This continues the narrative of 'humble distinction' that typifies the letter.

The closing section of his letter strikes a note and tone that has less of a 'recycled' feel than the rest of his application. This is where he focuses on the poverty his family has experienced:

I have the old story to repeat, that the publication of my books has not left me scarcely any pecuniary profit ; as it has been no difficult task to make the successive volumes pay. I have long had a severe struggle to support my rising family. My present salary as Bible Reader is £70 pounds per annum. My health is now feeble; and I earnestly appeal for that help which you are empowered to bestow.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> David Wright, 'Literary Taste and List Culture in a Time of "Endless Choice"', in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Anouk Lang (U.S.A.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 108-123 (p. 111).

<sup>155</sup> John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872.

This is a succinct summing up that plays for sympathy in a more knowing way than the rest of the application. The phrase ‘the old story’ shows that Harris is aware that his circumstances are not unique or original and this worldliness is intended to lift him up above other less self-aware literary mendicants. The phrase ‘pecuniary profit’ implies that poetry has been beneficial to Harris in other ways than financial. This would of course correspond with both the values of an era and, by association, a literary committee that invested poetry with great power to influence and affect people, thereby placing it into an entirely different class than novels. After detailing his struggles with his ‘rising’ family, Harris reinforces his lower social and financial status, emphasising his honesty using the word ‘earnestly’. His respect for the authority that is implicit in the committee is shown when he writes the supplicatory phrase ‘you are empowered to bestow’. This indicates that he would consider it a blessing to receive support from them but he is also implicitly implying they are god-like and showing that he understands and respects this hierarchical structure. It is important to establish that for Harris this comment is not mere flattery as the Royal Literary Fund committee *are* god-like inasmuch as they can help him to live and feed his family.

When considered carefully, it is unsurprising that Harris’s application was successful as it meets so many of the criteria identified by the Royal Literary Fund committee as their guiding principle. As Cross identifies, this was ‘relieving a distressed author’.<sup>156</sup> Distress could be interpreted as a financial or medical or a combination of both. The only slightly jarring note can be found in Harris’s postscript: ‘P.S. all my works have been published by subscription ; and I am only deterred from filling them in a collected form through stunted means.’<sup>157</sup> The purpose of the fund was to offer relief to writers and their families due to

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<sup>156</sup> Cross, p. 15.

<sup>157</sup> John Harris, *Items connected with the application for a grant from the Royal Literary Fund*, October 1872.

financial struggle. However, it is hard to avoid the assumption Harris used this grant to fund his subsequent collected works. Although no accounting is available to indicate that this was the case, *Wayside Pictures* did appear in 1874. This suggests that Harris's commitment to poetry writing was something that may have dominated all other demands. It also shows the performativity and humility required when trying to publish work as a labouring-class writer. It is unclear how Harris actually spent the money he received from the fund, but as the production of his books was at best an exercise in breaking even, it was possible that he was using the money to support his literary career. It is interesting to consider that writers who were Harris's social superiors could rack up serious debts due to their reputations. For example, Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* to relieve himself of serious debt.<sup>158</sup> It was necessary for Harris to construct his own personal narrative about his learning, genius, and poverty so he could be considered an acceptable charity case. Unlike Dickens, Harris was not able to rely on his literary reputation, just his poverty.

As well as receiving successful grants from the Royal Literary Fund, Harris was also the recipient of a payment from the Royal Bounty Fund. His *Dictionary of National Biography* entry identifies him as having secured two hundred pounds from Lord Beaconsfield in 1877 and Mr Gladstone in 1881. Cross outlines the typical recipient of the Royal Bounty Fund:

In addition to the Civil List pension fund, the Prime Minister and his civil servants were responsible for the distribution of the Royal Bounty Fund charged to the Civil List. Royal Bounty covered payments to 'females in distress', 'alms', 'privy purse' and 'special services'. [...] The criteria for Royal Bounty grants were much the same as for Civil List pensions, except the standard of literary merit was lower.

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<sup>158</sup> Kathleen Tillotson, 'A Background for *A Christmas Carol*', *Dickensian*, 89 (1993), 165-169 (p. 166).



[...] More usually Royal Bounty grants were awarded to needy writers whose work was undistinguished though perfectly respectable.<sup>159</sup>

It is hard to avoid the implicit impression that the mention of Harris's Royal Bounty Fund grants in his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry was meant to confer a kind of literary merit on him commensurate with receipt of the grant. Cross contradicts this, suggesting that it was quite similar to the Royal Literary Fund as a method of rewarding struggling, undistinguished, and perfectly respectable writers. For Cross, the real sign of praise for a writer was to receive a civil list pension and Harris was unable to secure one of these.

The Royal Bounty Fund's methodology has always been oblique. However, the basic mechanism for distribution of funds is clarified by Eunan O' Halpin:

It [The Royal Bounty Fund] was part of the Civil List, which served principally to meet the expenses of the royal household, and awards from the fund were in the gift of the First Lord of the Treasury, who was usually the Prime Minister.<sup>160</sup>

O'Halpin explains that in this instance the incumbent Prime Minister responsible for gifting the fund was advised by a private secretary as who to award. Information on the Royal Bounty Fund and its accounting is scarce. It is not possible to be sure what changes it might have undergone as it passed from the nineteenth into the twenty first century but when Tony Blair wound it up in 2002, *The Guardian* ran an article describing the enigmatic nature of the fund. The newspaper implied that its methods of dispensing aid were unaccounted for and wrapped in secrecy.<sup>161</sup> Therefore, it is hard to be sure of the

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<sup>159</sup> Cross, pp. 87-88.

<sup>160</sup> Eunan O'Halpin, 'British Patronage and an Irish Writer: The Award of a Government Grant to James Joyce in 1916', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 24 (1986), 79-83 (p. 79).

<sup>161</sup> Alan Travis, 'Scrapped, the secret funds that few knew existed', *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2002, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/jun/03/uk.society>> [accessed 3 December 2023]

exact processes Harris went through to secure this grant but it appears that the processes were designed to allow little public accountability and that this arrangement seems to have been sustained until it was closed. Therefore, the next section of this chapter focuses on the relationships Harris developed with local dignitaries that may have helped him to secure assistance from this fund.

### Political perspectives and the Royal Bounty Fund

Despite Smith's earlier patronage and some support from both the Royal Literary Fund and The Royal Bounty Fund, Harris's financial situation was consistently precarious and he successfully applied to the Royal Literary Fund at least twice in 1872 and 1875.<sup>162</sup> This shows that whatever he was awarded in 1872 made little impression on his financial situation in the longer term. He was not unusual in this as debt was a real and serious issue for labouring-class writers. Cross cites Robert Southey's letter attacking the fund for the *Quarterly Review* which clarifies the limited nature of support the fund provided:

Nothing can be more evident, than that such liberality [as dispensed by the RLF] is as useless to literature as it is pitiful in itself. The wretched author who applies to these literary overseers, receives about as much from the bounty of the General Committee as the law would have entitled him to, in the course of twelve months, if he had applied to the parish to support him and his family as paupers.<sup>163</sup>

In essence, the Royal Literary Fund contributions were tokenistic. As Harris observed the publishing of his books was expensive, he did not turn a profit and he had a struggling family to support. Although the Royal Literary Fund grants he received might have helped

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<sup>162</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography Vol XXV Harris—Henry I.*, ed. by Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, p. 16.

<sup>163</sup> Cross, p. 23.

towards the costs of publishing and supporting his family, they were not sufficient in themselves.

It therefore behoved Harris to keep developing his relationships with other possible patrons. His move to Falmouth in the autumn of 1857 afforded him the opportunity to begin to develop his social contacts in a larger town. The relationship between respectability and patronage receives an enigmatic mention from Harris in his introduction to *Tales and Poems* (1877). In the preface, Harris establishes that the book is collection of journalism pieces which have not yet been grouped together for publication and that

The author's reason for making this volume varied with song and story is, that he is desirous of meeting as far as possible the wishes and tastes of his patrons, as it is so important to sell his books.<sup>164</sup>

The preface in *Tales and Poems* is perhaps the first time that Harris expresses a political opinion in all of his corpus. This opinion is focused on some of the political strategies of reclaiming waste land that were being considered at the time. In Harris's words:

Several of these sketches point to the desirability of cultivating the waste lands of the United Kingdom, which perhaps will become one of the important Government questions of the future, and would surely do more for the maintenance of England's prosperity than the magnifying of her armies or the enlargement of her arsenals and prisons.<sup>165</sup>

Previously, his only political commentary had been the promotion of a pacifism which was so non-specific as to be apolitical. This engagement with any kind of politics is at compete

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<sup>164</sup> John Harris, *Tales and Poems* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1877), p. vi.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

odds with the humble and self-deprecating thanks that litter previous prefaces to his poetry collections. Harris's move to Falmouth and his association with a wider range of people are certainly the reason for this more politicised aspect of Harris's writing. Some of these characters will be explored later in the chapter but his relationships with the anti-war publisher of tracts John Gill, the prominent quaker, philosopher and inventor Robert Were Fox as well as Harris's relationship with the Falmouth and Penryn M.P. Earl of Northbrook contributed towards this new aspect to his writing.

Harris adds some further clarification around this politicised writing in his autobiography when he discusses his journalism on the 1876 Commons Act. This was an act focused on preserving and improving – rather than extinguishing – the nation's surviving common lands.<sup>166</sup> As someone whose work as a miner had brought him into close contact with land that was damaged and spoiled due to mining processes, it is not surprising that Harris had a view on the matter. He writes in his autobiography:

Throughout the years 1875–6, Mr. J.E.M. Vincent employed me to write for him. He was the editor of two weeklies printed and published in Leamington. I worked diligently in the evenings, and in my hours of leisure, and produced a large number of articles chiefly on the land question ; several of which ran through the both papers, and I have reason to believe they were well received.<sup>167</sup>

The polite but enigmatic phrase, 'I have reason to believe they were well-received' suggests that Harris received some attention, support, or positivity from people he

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<sup>166</sup> Eleanor A. Straughton, 'Regulation of common land under the Commons Act 1876: central and local perspectives' (abstract History Department, Lancaster University: AHRC 'Contested Common Land Project', <http://commons.ncl.ac.uk>.) <[https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/1367/\\_Straughton\\_145401.pdf?sequence=1](https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/1367/_Straughton_145401.pdf?sequence=1)> [accessed 3 December 2023]

<sup>167</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 96.

perceived to be significant. It would seem that Harris's political perspective aligned with that of the government and its Prime Minister. It is relevant to note that the state of agriculture in England in the 1870s was not ideal and was causing some potential issues for the aristocracy in terms of their revenue. There were of course causal effects to any lowering of the gentry's income. Ian St John observes the following:

It is ironic [...] that the fabric of aristocratic England entered its period of most rapid decay when Disraeli himself became Prime Minister in the 1870s. The cause of that decay was the arrival of cheap foodstuff from the Americas and the Antipodes. Wheat, lamb, beef, dairy products, wool: all began to flood the English market, pushing down agriculture prices by up to half, and with them the rents that had funded not only the lifestyle of the upper classes but also, as Disraeli had observed, the great institutions of England like the Church, the universities and local justice.<sup>168</sup>

This flooding of the market with cheaper food stuffs from overseas must have had a significant effect on agricultural workers whose profits were slashed. The impact of this on the upper classes was also significant. The reduced profits from the farmers they rented their fields to meant a reduction in demand for their land. This may also have been coupled with a diminishment in prompt and full payment for the land that was rented although there is no way of being sure of this.

Harris's political views were aligned with the interests of the aristocracy and ruling government. This is, of course, not unusual for Harris who openly states in the Preface to *Tales and Poems* that 'the author's reason for making this volume varied with song and

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<sup>168</sup> Ian St John, *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Anthem Press, 2010), p. 121.

story is, that he is desirous of meeting as far as possible the wishes and tastes of his patrons, as it is so important to sell his books.<sup>169</sup> This quotation suggests that Harris was aware of the level of innovation required to sustain his presence in print. The novelty of being a miner who wrote poetry had dissipated long ago, and he now had to find other methods to engage the interest and support of potential patrons. The improvement in common lands alluded to in the 1876 Act could have been purely for recreation and enjoyment but, viewed from a matter of political and financial expediency, one might suggest that the real advantage could be had from using commons land for agricultural purposes. Newman states that,

In Cornwall, aided by steam ploughs, a fair amount of work had been done to this end. The burning of furze, the blasting of rock, the building of walls, had transformed the look of the countryside [...] Lord Falmouth had gradually been enclosing his waste land and the Bassetts were quick to cultivate their own hitherto unproductive assets.<sup>170</sup>

This shows that closures were happening in Harris's direct environment and so it seems entirely apposite for him to comment on this piece of legalisation.

Newman's phrase 'unproductive assets' is key. Although this land could be worked on by anyone who applied to use it, farmers who also rented land off the local gentry would use some of their revenue to pay for their rates in other areas. If farmers were not renting land from the upper classes, it is more than probable that they were renting property from them as they would have been farming land in their local vicinity. Any attempts to support their increase in revenue at little expense to the landowner could lead to improved financial

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<sup>169</sup> Harris, *Tales and Poems*, p. vi.

<sup>170</sup> Newman, p. 99.

continence for little output. This would be at a time when income from agriculture in the UK was falling due the flood of exports so any increase in revenue for either farmers or their landlords would have been welcome. Therefore, much of what Harris advocates in *Tales and Poems* is aligned to give his writing the oxygen of print and potentially attract the notice of powerful men. *Tales and Poems* consists of a series of aphoristic short stories which promote the Christian values of hard work and are occasionally critical of those with advantage who exploit others.

In terms of Harris's feelings towards the land question, his short story 'Samuel Sound's Success' is the most indicative of how he adopted the values of his patrons to produce work that pleased them. This story concerns a young man whose father is an unredeemed drunkard and whose mother passes away. The young man in question, Samuel Sound, is left with a farm that has much in common with common ground. It is described as '[being] untilled for a long period, so that the fields looked like small gorse crofts'.<sup>171</sup> For those acquainted with Harris's corpus, it is perhaps unsurprising that Samuel Sound is a model of labouring-class virtue and independence. Despite his lack of parents, Samuel achieves 'regular employment, is steady and respected, has good food and clothing, has taught himself to read and write'.<sup>172</sup> After this act of self-improvement, Samuel turns to developing the unproductive land:

What a task lay before him, looking worse, perhaps, than it really was ! Brier and  
bramble, brush and brake everywhere! "Little by little" was his daily text. He  
struck into the brushwood right and left, hacking and hewing like a hero ; and the  
thorn and the thicket fell before his hook, like grass before the scythe of the mower.  
Furze and bramble lay in heaps, until the crackling fire consumed them, the smoke

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<sup>171</sup> Harris, *Tales and Poems*, p. 48.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

rolling away in volumes ; and the ashes were strewn over the field for manure.

“Little by little” was Samuel's creed, which lays a tribute on sea and land. [...] At last the field was quite finished, and the increase was left with HIM. The dew fell, the early rain descended, the sun shone, the blade appeared, then the ear, and then the full corn, rich, rustling, and heavy. Yes ! it was a good crop.<sup>173</sup>

This story is both attempting to inspire others to utilise common land as well as providing a form of instruction manual for the order in which this kind of work might be attempted. In common with his poems about mining processes, Harris does go into a great degree of technical detail about how untilled land might be reclaimed. It contains sequential practical advice about how to clear agricultural land and dispose of the waste as well as some more general advice about taking a slow but steady approach. Unsurprisingly, Samuel is left with a good crop. This piece of writing was no doubt well received by Harris's patrons as it instructed its audience on how land could be turned to profit. If this land happened to be common land, it would do the upper-class landowner no harm and would most likely result in them seeing some of the profit.

The themes in Harris's short story on Samuel Smiles were also topics of his journalistic output. This two-pronged approach which used both imaginative and factual forms might have been of some value to landowners and businessmen as he was a vocal representative of the common man who was aligned with their own political agendas. This is implied by his observations about the reception of his political journalism. To connect the two strands of argument, it would appear that the Royal Bounty Fund was awarded to respectable literary men in need. As Eunan O' Halpin observes, it was convention that these sorts of writers were drawn to the Prime Minister's attention by a friend or subordinate.<sup>174</sup> This

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>174</sup> Eunan O'Halpin, pp. 79-83.



then leaves the question of how, in an era so saturated with print, Harris was able to attract this sort of attention from people with this level of power and influence.

The patrons and friends that Harris alludes to in *Tales and Poems* were varied. Some were from a religious background who were sympathetic to Harris's religious zeal. One high profile acquaintance Harris made during his time at Falmouth was the Fox family who were wealthy quakers. Newman describes them in the following fashion:

The Foxes were zealous in their support of charitable institutions. They drew into their circle people who had distinguished themselves artistically or intellectually: Wordsworth, Carlyle, the philosopher John Stuart Mill and Charles Kingsley could be numbered among their friends.<sup>175</sup>

Clearly socially mobile, the Foxes were also friends with the Earl of Northbrook and encouraged him to apply for the role of M.P. for Penryn and Falmouth in 1852. Northbrook was to become a patron of Harris's supporting a few volumes of his later work including *Walks with the Wild Flowers* and *The Two Giants*. Northbrook was not successful on his 1852 application for M.P. but acquired the role in 1857. Harris's move to Falmouth in 1857 would have coincided with Northbrook's appointment as M.P. It is also clear that, either independently or through the Foxes, Harris and Northbrook developed some form of friendship. After removing himself from politics for a period of time due to familial bereavements and a pursuit of interests, Northbrook was offered the role of Viceroy of India by Gladstone. This was a role he accepted after the assassination of its previous incumbent in 1872.<sup>176</sup> The relationship between Northbrook and Harris is first

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<sup>175</sup> Newman, p. 64.

<sup>176</sup> David Steele, 'Baring, Thomas George, first earl of Northbrook (1826–1904)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2009), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30586>> [accessed 3 December 2023]

alluded to in the preface to Harris's 1875 collection, *Walks with the Wild Flowers*, which was a collection of poetry primarily celebrating flowers indigenous to Cornwall with an additional small collection of miscellaneous poems but primarily focused on topics promoting Christian values.- Northbrook is referred to in terms indicative of patronage and support:

TO THE  
  
RIGHT HONOURABLE LORD NORTHBROOK,  
  
HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF INDIA,  
  
IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIS PLEASANT CONNEXION WITH  
  
FALMOUTH, CORNWALL,  
  
IN THE  
  
HOUSE OF COMMONS  
  
FOR SEVERAL YEARS,  
  
HIS GENERAL COURTESY, DISINTERESTED REGARD,  
LONG-TRIED FRIENDSHIP, CHEERFUL PATRONAGE, AND JUST  
APPRECIATION OF TALENT AND TRUTH,<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> John Harris, *Walks with the Wild Flowers* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1875), p. iv.

This confirms the relationship between the two men. Harris's reference to a 'long-trying friendship' in 1875 would suggest that their friendship may have commenced near the beginning of Northbrook's role as M.P. for Penryn and Falmouth. The 'cheerful patronage' casts Northbrook as another keen supporter of Harris's work much like George Smith. As George Smith had died in 1868, Northbrook probably replaced him as Harris's wealthy and influential sponsor. The comment about 'just appreciation of talent and truth' might be platitudinal but some later dedicatory stanzas to Northbrook in *The Two Giants* bear out the idea that the two men held very similar views about religion and peace. The next mention of Northbrook is in Harris's 1877 collection *Tales and Poems* where the Earl is the subject of a poem entitled, 'A Hymn of Welcome to the Right Honourable The Earl of Northbrook on His Safe Return from India'. The following is a short excerpt from this panegyric:

And other thoughts, to him allied,  
Are with us on this harvest-tide,—  
How he was ours, through changeful years,  
Amid our country's honoured peers ;  
Courteous and kind where'er he went,  
The greatest gift that Heaven hath lent,  
Leaving a memory in our souls,  
Like flowers where deepest water rolls.  
So Cornish hearts rejoice to-day,  
[...]  
We welcome Northbrook home again.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Harris, *Tales and Poems*, pp. 136-137.

The references to the ‘harvest-tide’ and ‘the greatest gift that Heaven hath lent’ may well have been references to Harris’s anticipation of Northbrook’s renewed patronage after his return from his role of Lord Viceroy of India. An equally plausible interpretation is that the image of ‘harvest’ is used in a religious context to celebrate the material and spiritual gains that Northbrook’s return will bring to his constituency. There is a consistent tone of obsequious flattery to this stanza. Northbrook is referred to as ‘honoured’ showing Harris’s perception of the level of respect he attracts from his contemporaries. This is also an implicit tribute to his significant role in India. Northbrook’s Christian values are celebrated as he is described as ‘courteous’ and ‘kind’. The whole range of Northbrook’s achievements and personality are admired along with the enduring memory he left with his constituency, emphasised by the metaphor, ‘leaving a memory in our souls’.

A comparison between the two dedications to Northbrook in *Two Giants* (1878) with *Walks with the Wild Flowers* (1875) is instructive in charting the developing relationship between the two men. *The Walks with the Wild Flowers* dedication have been cited previously. *The Two Giants* one is reproduced below:

DEDICATION.  
TO THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE  
THE EARL NORTHBROOK,  
AS A HUMBLE  
YET FILIAL TOKEN OF ESTEEM AND  
GRATITUDE FOR HIS VALUED  
FRIENDSHIP FOR MANY YEARS,  
THIS LITTLE VOLUME  
ENTITLED

“THE TWO GIANTS”  
IS BY PERMISSION  
RESPECTFULLY AND THANKFULLY  
INSCRIBED BY HIS GRATEFUL  
COUNTRYMAN,  
JOHN HARRIS.<sup>179</sup>

This dedication implies more of a relationship of equals than the dedication in *Walks with the Wild Flowers*. The ‘valued friendship’ referred to in *Two Giants* is synonymous with the ‘long-trying’ one in *Walks with Wild Flowers*. However, the word ‘filial’ places Northbrook as a father figure to Harris even though he was six years younger than him. The word ‘valued’ is something that can be interpreted as an implicit reference to monetary terms, but it would also indicate a relationship based on a shared set of values. This is then followed by a dedicatory poem to Northbrook which will be examined later in this chapter. When looked at together, the three prefaces suggest an increasingly supportive relationship between Harris and Northbrook. The increased amount of space allocated to Northbrook’s tribute in the final preface suggested that his standing had further increased with Harris both as a friend and a patron.

When he moved to Falmouth, Harris’s relationship with politics was not just limited to his friendship with Northbrook. The move also enabled him to actualise his political views through new friendships and relationships. One of these was with the Penryn publisher John Gill who both influenced and published Harris’s more political writing. John Gill’s relationship with Harris is described as follows by Newman:

Stimulus and support for such [peace loving] views were provided by Harris’s close friend, John Gill, Quaker, pacifist and vegetarian. Gill edited the *Penryn*

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<sup>179</sup> John Harris, *Two Giants* (London: Hamilton, Adam, & Co., 1878), p. iii.

*Advertiser*, a small newspaper which he used to propagate his own liberal and religious opinions. He was a staunch friend to Harris. [...] Convinced that tracts were the tools of social reform, he produced an unstoppable torrent of them — 228,000 in one year!<sup>180</sup>

Newman's description of John Gill gives us a sense of the influence he was likely to exert over Harris. Harris was also staunchly anti-war and susceptible to any encouragement to express these opinions. It comes as no surprise to discover that Gill was responsible for Harris's 1872 collection, *Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems*. In his Preface, Harris acknowledges Gill as the originator of the idea for the collection and pays tribute to Gill's work in various 'Sunday-schools [that] have enabled him to form Bond of Peace Societies'.<sup>181</sup> In addition to *Cruise of the Cutter*, Gill also commissioned Harris to write tracts promoting peace.<sup>182</sup> This latter and overt politicisation in Harris's writing may also be further consolidated by his relationship with more gentrified Falmouth families with political views such as the Foxes as well as his association with Northbrook. As we have seen, throughout his writing career Harris had to meet the needs and tastes of his patrons. In his formative years in Bolenowe and Troon, any political thoughts he might have had were dismissed as they related to the exploitation of the working man. These were not favourable opinions to any of the local community who made any profit from this industry. However, the promotion of peace was both Christian and essentially apolitical. This meant that he was able to offer these opinions quite freely and attract support from more high profile patrons. *Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems* was dedicated to the reformer, Lady Burdett Coutts, who was another advocate of peace. Newman explains:

Baroness Burdett Coutts (1814–1906), to whom *The Cruise of the Cutter* is dedicated. She is hailed for her "Christian consideration to the toilers of Great

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<sup>180</sup> Newman, pp. 94-95.

<sup>181</sup> John Harris, *The Cruise of the Cutter and other Poems* (London: Partridge & Co., 1872), p. v.

<sup>182</sup> Newman, p. 95.

Britain” and as “a benefactress of mankind” (and therefore presumably of Harris himself). Tall, slender, graceful and grave, the Baroness was described as the “richest heiress in all England.” When she inherited part of Thomas Coutts banking fortune, no eligible young man was said to have abstained from proposing to her. Her philanthropic enterprises were vast and comprehensive and she endowed churches, schools, hospitals, museums and scientific institutions.<sup>183</sup>

Lady Burdett-Coutts was committed to social reform and not literary criticism. Her support of churches showed that she would have shared some of Harris’s religious convictions. Paul Newman rightly identifies Harris’s acknowledgement of his labouring-class origins here when he implicitly refers to himself as a ‘toiler’ and her a ‘benefactress’. Her support of Harris was quite likely to have been limited to being a subscriber to his books in larger quantities than average.

Being peace loving was also another common factor between Harris and Lord Northbrook. Both of them harboured strong religious and peaceful convictions. Harris’s commitment to his religious faith has already been established earlier in this chapter and the previous one. Regarding Northbrook, *The Dictionary of National Biography* confirms that,

The deaths of his wife, whom he never ceased to mourn, and of his younger son, a midshipman lost at sea three years later, intensified a deeply religious outlook, rooted in an eirenical Christianity.<sup>184</sup>

The word ‘eirenical’ is key here as it promotes Northbrook’s peace-loving side. Peace of course was a key goal and interest that both men had in common, which was informed in both instances by their strong religious faith. In his introduction to *Two Giants*, Harris shows a burgeoning sense of social commentary which was to become more realised in

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>184</sup> David Steele, para. 4.

later volumes. Much of this politicking bears the influences of his associates such as John Gill whose proliferation of tracts espousing anti-war sentiments was bound to have had an influence on Harris. John Gill was born in St Ive in East Cornwall.<sup>185</sup> After some itinerant travelling around with his labouring-class parents, he eventually became apprenticed as a bookbinder and was, like many other Cornishmen, a member of the Wesleyan society.<sup>186</sup> After the failure of the businessman to which he was apprenticed, Gill was able to rent a shop and begin his own bookbinding business. His work as an active Wesleyan meant Gill often visited the sick and elderly. Finding them desperate for something to read, he started to offer them tracts he had accrued from the Royal Tract Society. He then formed a Wesleyan Tract Society in Penryn.<sup>187</sup> Gill regularly visited Sunday Schools to endorse peace and counter what he saw as the glorification of war, producing his own tracts promoting these viewpoints.<sup>188</sup> Gill had known Harris since his move to Falmouth and recruited him to write a collection of tracts entitled *Peace Pages* for which he paid Harris a pound for writing each tract.<sup>189</sup> In his introduction, Harris acknowledges Gill's influence on the tracts and it would seem most likely these were adapted or reprinted from the original *Peace Pages* that he wrote for Gill in his collection *The Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems*.<sup>190</sup> The capitalisation of 'GIANT DRINK' and 'GIANT WAR' in *Two Giants* is likely an influence from the more direct method of communication that Gill used in his short tracts:

It will be obvious to the reader that the two huge overgrown monsters herein personified, and giving the book its title, are none other than GIANT DRINK and GIANT WAR, whose terrible deeds so desolate the earth. They both destroy their thousands and their tens of thousands of all ages : and the writer trusts that these

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<sup>185</sup> Wendy Monk, *John Gill of Penryn* (Plymouth: E.J. Rickard, 1971?), p. 12.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>190</sup> Harris, *The Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems*, p. v.



simple lyrics, which are chiefly scenes of rural life, and pictures from the toiling peasantry of the realm, may be welcomed by his philanthropic countrymen, and serve, in some small measure, to accelerate the overthrow of INTEMPERANCE and the SWORD.<sup>191</sup>

Harris's personification of war as a giant 'whose deeds so desolate the earth' would have appealed to Northbrook, whose principles were also pacifistic. Despite his naval connections, he always believed in the liberal doctrine of 'keeping up our [England's] naval strength rather than playing at being a great military power'.<sup>192</sup> Northbrook's behaviour as Lord Viceroy of India was also indicative of a man disinterested in acts of aggression. In fact, it has been acknowledged that, had some of his political strategy in this role had not been overruled by the Duke of Argyll, Northbrook could have potentially prevented the Second Afghan war.<sup>193</sup> That said, calling Northbrook peace loving is problematic. His role as the position of Viceroy of India involved oppressing another nation in act of colonial violence.

An indication of the depth of Harris's feelings for Northbrook can be found in the dedicatory stanzas in the opening of *Two Giants*. This poem offers an interesting insight into Harris's perception of Northbrook and their relationship. The first two stanzas of the poem relay Harris's experiencing of a 'vision' of what is needed to support the poor in a bucolic environment and the power of religion to alleviate poverty:

When lo ! a vision met my anxious ken,  
Amid the bracken of the bouldered moor,  
And well I knew 'twas one with will to lift the poor.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Harris, *The Two Giants*, p. vii.

<sup>192</sup> David Steele, para. 14.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 9.

<sup>194</sup> Harris, *The Two Giants*, p. iii.

The 'vision' that meets Harris's 'anxious ken' is clearly Northbrook who is introduced with the word 'lo'. 'Lo' is a frequently used biblical expression which invests Northbrook with a kind of righteous quality and also casts him in a saviour-like role. The use of the archaic word 'ken' also invests Northbrook with a timeless omniscient quality further commensurate with the Bible's timeless teachings. This section of the stanza works as a reversal of God's casting out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Here, Northbrook appears with the knowledge to alleviate the plight of suffering humanity rather than to endure it. There is nothing extant in biographical writing about Northbrook to suggest that he was especially well disposed towards those in need. Harris may well have been one of the poor who was lifted by Northbrook's actions.

Poverty is further personified in stanza two being cast as 'sighing on the sill'.<sup>195</sup> This image is further indicative of Harris's supplication for support which has been received by Northbrook, as the third verse moves beyond abstraction and into an extended tribute to Northbrook specifically. It is made explicit that he is the man capable of realising Harris's vision:

But nevermore that vision met mine eye,  
Till NORTHBROOK came with humbleness of soul,  
Whose faithful friendship bade the shadows fly,  
And cheered me onward to the final goal,<sup>196</sup>

After establishing Northbrook's 'faithful friendship', stanza four reads:

The truest helper is the man of peace,  
Whose sword is sheathed, whose spear idly pent,  
Who strives that war and wretchedness may cease,

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

The gun be hushed, and the last bullet spent ;  
To save, not waste, his sanctified intent :  
Who cheers his brother on life's rude highway,  
Whose feeble steps are slowly homeward bent,  
And such is NORTHBROOK, with no false display,  
So gladly I to him inscribe my simple lay.<sup>197</sup>

This stanza is an unabashed celebration of Northbrook's humanity. Sibilance is used to show his sword being sheathed rather than drawn. This displays his peaceful side. To continue the liturgical representations of Northbrook his intent is 'sanctified' by a higher power and his equanimity and fellow feeling of the common man who 'cheers his brother on life's rude highway'. Presumably, Harris was referring to himself here.

At places throughout the poem, there is a slight blurring between Harris's celebration of Northbrook's greatness to humanity in general and his greatness to Harris specifically. The line in stanza three where Northbrook is described as 'having cheered me [Harris] on to my final goal' would suggest that the personal and political were deeply intertwined for Harris. This personal tribute to what Northbrook might have done for Harris is juxtaposed with the more generalised tribute to Northbrook's peace-loving qualities where he is implicitly referred to as 'the man of peace [...] who strives that war and wretchedness may cease'. It is arguable that, as well as wanting to give Northbrook his due as a patron, Harris also wanted to use his support for him as fellow peace-lover and a poor man as indicative of Northbrook's generous spirit.

Formally, Harris's dedicatory stanzas are Spenserian. This style of poetic composition had fallen into disuse but was reintroduced in the nineteenth century by the Romantic poets.

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

Harris was first exposed to the Spenserian stanza by his hearing of 'Childe Harold' with George Bull.<sup>198</sup> A C Hamilton and William W. Barker state that Byron's use of the Spenserian stanza

shows his tact as an artist, his ability to honor his forerunner while also exploiting him, to reminisce while also reconstituting him. That effect of reconstitution may be the most important mark of the relationship between the two poets.<sup>199</sup>

What is noteworthy in relation to Harris and Northbrook here is the idealism implicit in Romanticism. Its orientation towards an ultimate ideal has much in common with Harris's idealisation of Northbrook as an advocate of peace. Byron's formal adoption of Spenser shows both his versatility in appropriating him into his own voice and the subsequent implication of his worth to the English mainstream; Harris's use of such a well-recognised and literary metre is also not without its deliberate intentions and connotations. By using a metrical form commensurate with the literary heritage but also with a notion of perfection and idealism, Harris is implying that Northbrook is a man of greatness and deserving of a seminal place in English history. The sheer awe Harris experienced in hearing Byron's *Childe Harold* (written in this measure) for the first time is alluded to in his autobiography where he refers to *Childe Harold* as being written by a 'powerful magician'.<sup>200</sup> It was the most extreme compliment Harris could pay Northbrook in terms of the form of his composition.

In terms of social mobility, a close reading of the latter half of Harris's corpus combined with some contextual understanding of the lives of both men would suggest that

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<sup>198</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 63.

<sup>199</sup> *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. by A.C. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 1990; repr. 1992), p. 126.

<sup>200</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 63.

Northbrook's patronage was an evolution of what Harris may have received from previous patrons such as George Smith. It appears likely that, as well as acting as a traditional patron of Harris's work, the close friendship and shared values between the two men led to Northbrook's promotion of Harris as a poet worthy of notice and support from some of the country's highest echelons of power.

The collegiate nature of Harris's friendship with Northbrook is a marked departure from his relationship with Smith. Although both Smith and Northbrook were Harris's social and financial superiors, Northbrook was six years younger than Harris which led to more naturally equitable relationship than Smith who was twenty years Harris's senior. Equally, Smith's assistance was more openly 'patronising' as he was Harris's advocate and salesman whereas Northbrook used his influence in more subtle political machinations to support Harris's career. It would seem likely that the close relationship between Northbrook and Gladstone led to Northbrook using his relationship with Gladstone to support their shared mission of developing and promoting peace. Northbrook may well have seen Harris's promotion of peace in his poetry as the best way of promoting it amongst his own social class, a sentiment echoed by Harris in his Preface to *Two Giants*:

Has not song sometimes accomplished what sterner philosophy could not achieve ?  
So he has been irresistibly drawn to attempt to wound these strong destroyers of  
mankind with the wild-wood warblings of his muse.<sup>201</sup>

The 'song' Harris refers to is populist and inclusive whereas 'sterner philosophy' is much more exclusive. The adjective 'sterner' suggests an authoritative and intimidating quality which is then heightened by the intellectual elitism of 'philosophy'. It would seem that Harris's mission is clear here. His goal was to convert the 'sterner philosophy' of those in

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<sup>201</sup> Harris, *Two Giants*, pp. vii-viii.

power for consumption by the masses into the form of ‘song’. Due to an aligned political outlook with those in power and as an esteemed instructor to his fellow working man, Harris’s voice was seen as being fit to be encouraged for mass consumption.

### Conclusion

The patronage Harris received throughout his career has one common factor: the usefulness of his message to those who wished to support him. It is possible to credit George Smith with a degree of empathy when it came to supporting Harris and his own failed attempts at poetry suggest that his patronage may have also contained an element of vicariousness. However, as a successful industrialist, Smith had other motivations. Promoting a labouring-class poet who promoted a passive view of exploitative labour to his peers was financially advantageous and it lessened dissent from Smith’s possible employees. The process of patronage in the Victorian era is revealed to be both precarious and inconsistent for labouring-class writers such as Harris. The status raising role of the patron for a labouring-class poet soon appeared to wear off for many people and many labouring-class writers were left in limbo where their self-perception as literary men was the only thing that they had left to support themselves with. It therefore comes as no surprise that Harris sought relief from literary funds and other supportive relationships to sustain his literary career. Earlier in this chapter, Paul Newman’s evaluation of poetic career was cited when he argued that after Harris’s award of the Shakespeare tercentenary prize in 1864 ‘not a great deal had happened to enhance his standing’.<sup>202</sup> I would suggest that Newman’s evaluation ignores the context of Harris’s literary successes. A noteworthy aspect of Harris is his negotiating of a path between publication and patronage. Bridget Keegan observes that ‘the Cornish tin-miner John Harris ranks among the most prolific laboring-class poets of the Victorian age, with fifteen published collections of poetry

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<sup>202</sup> Newman, p. 124.

between 1853 and 1884' which goes some way to clarifying the level of publication he was able to achieve.<sup>203</sup> Although always subservient to the ideologies of his patrons, his move to Falmouth facilitated his relationships with supporters who were more aligned with his own opinions. The fact that Harris was able to use some his relationships with personages like Lord Northbrook to promote some of his own values such as peace should also be considered alongside his achievements as a poet.

This chapter has established that Harris's publishing success during his lifetime can be attributed to his skilful ability to use his writing to intertwine his own personal attributes and latterly personal politics with the sympathy or interests of his patrons. This resulted in an extensive corpus that begins from Harris's position as both a role model and curiosity for his middle-class sponsors as a miner poet. As Harris escaped the mine and became more socially mobile, his exposure to middle-class dignitaries led to his espousal of anti-war sentiments and useful commentaries about land enclosure and temperance. This further facilitated his publication in a wider range of forms and meant that he was able to evolve thematically from his labouring-class origins. The next chapter of this thesis moves towards an evaluation of Harris's qualities as a poet *per se* in the context of historic and contemporary academic criticism around labouring-class poets.

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<sup>203</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 226.

Chapter 3: Labouring the argument: evaluating Harris's corpus in the light of scholarship  
on Victorian labouring-class poets

Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis have focused on understanding John Harris's corpus in context. I have explained that the publication and critical acclaim his work received was primarily due to its promotion of the dominant ideologies of the Victorian era irrespective of its critical merit. Although many Victorian critics praised Harris the man, none of their views considered him as a poet, preferring instead to praise the values he espoused in his poetry rather than considering his formal abilities as a poet. This chapter will offer close readings of Harris's poetry in the context of academic perspectives on nineteenth-century labouring-class poetry.

This chapter will audit the field of labouring-class poetics and academic criticism from a chronological perspective. Harris will be compared with other labouring-class poets who have been the subject of academic investigation to consider the judgements and criteria that have been used to retrospectively judge labouring-class poets. The first section begins by considering how labouring-class poets were perceived by their literary peers in the nineteenth century. The discussion then moves forward into the latter half of the twentieth century where labouring-class poetics becomes a discrete topic of academic study. During this period, a divide opens up between the large majority of labouring-class writers who subscribed to the literary conventions of the nineteenth century, such as John Harris, and those who opt for a more radicalised and politically informed approach, such as Gerald Massey, Samuel Bamford, Joseph Skipsey, and Ebenezer Elliot.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, certain poets have been feted by critics such as Martha Vicinus due to the politicised aspects of their writing. During the 1990s, Brian Maidment's *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught poets and poetry in Victorian Britain* acknowledged



that the vast majority of labouring-class poetry had been overlooked. Maidment's reaction was to identify labouring-class poets who transcended historical discourse as the ones worthy of academic study.<sup>204</sup> After the year 2000 criticism begins to move towards an inclusive and nuanced approach to labouring-class poetics, heralded by John Goodridge's online database in 2001 entitled *Laboring-Class Poets Online*.<sup>205</sup> This is an inclusive online document for recording the existence of any labouring-class poet shorn of any criteria except their identification as labouring-class by the contributor, and features an entry for John Harris amongst many others. It is important to acknowledge that it does not reproduce poetry from most of these poets, preferring to indicate their existence and where they have achieved publication. In 2008 Florence Boos published *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain* which focuses exclusively on labouring-class poetics from a female perspective and poses some interesting questions about inclusivity which are explored later in this chapter.<sup>206</sup> Mike Sanders's publication of the *Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* appeared in 2011.<sup>207</sup> This was followed by Margaret A. Loose's *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* in 2014, which explores the agency created by Chartist poetry, placing an especial focus on women and internationalism.<sup>208</sup> Both books further diversify the field of labouring-class poetics. Simon Rennie's *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5)* database in 2017 begins to collate disparate poetry from various newspaper sources, acknowledging them as an important outlet of labouring-class writing.<sup>209</sup> This exploration seems to be a logical extension of Andrew Hobbs's work on the local press as poetry

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<sup>204</sup> 'The Parnassians', in *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught poets and poetry in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Brian Maidment (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987; repr. 1992), pp. 97-100.

<sup>205</sup> Goodridge, *Laboring-Class Poets Online*.

<sup>206</sup> *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology*, ed. by Florence S. Boos.

<sup>207</sup> Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (2009; repr. 2011: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>208</sup> Margaret A. Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014).

<sup>209</sup> Simon Rennie, *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5)*.

publisher in 2012.<sup>210</sup> In 2013 *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labour-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900* was published by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji, also advocating for a more inclusive approach to labouring-class poetics.<sup>211</sup> Suz Garrard’s PhD thesis on ‘Manufacturing Selves : The Poetics of Self- Representation and Identity in the Poetry of Three “Factory-Girls”, 1840-1882’ in 2017 places an especial emphasis on periodical writing and how it enabled labouring-class women to engage with typologies of class and gender in nineteenth-century poetics.<sup>212</sup> In 2018 Kirstie Blair, Mike Sanders, Oliver Betts and Lauren Weiss’s online database *Piston, Pen & Press* further extends this inclusive approach to the marginalised, focusing particularly on poets working in factories and mines.<sup>213</sup> This is a distinctly different enterprise from Goodridge’s database as it contains anthologies of poems and critical perspectives on these writers as opposed to simply alluding to their existence. At a similar time, Gordon James Tait’s 2018 thesis ‘Coal, correspondence and Nineteenth-Century poetry: Joseph Skipsey and the problems of social class’ furthers this engagement with the mining community.<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, none of this work makes reference to Harris although this is likely due to Blair et al’s focus on poets on Scotland and the North of England and Tait’s principal focus on Skipsey. Kirstie Blair’s 2019 publication *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* offers an important challenge to the notions of ‘good’ poetry that has been upheld by academics, suggesting that all labouring-class poetry is worthy of investigation and that much of it has remained critically neglected due to these dated notions.<sup>215</sup> Simon Rennie’s 2020

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<sup>210</sup> Andrew Hobbs, ‘Five Million Poems, or the Local Press as Poetry Publisher 1800-1900’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45 (2012), 488-92.

<sup>211</sup> Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji, *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

<sup>212</sup> Suz Garrard, ‘Manufacturing Selves: The Poetics of Self- Representation and Identity in the Poetry of Three “Factory-Girls”, 1840-1882’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 2017).

<sup>213</sup> *Piston, Pen & Press*.

<sup>214</sup> Gordon James Tait, ‘Coal, correspondence, and Nineteenth-Century poetry: Joseph Skipsey and the problems of social class’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 2018).

<sup>215</sup> Kirstie Blair, *Working Verse in Victorian: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 2.

publication of *The Poetry of Ernest Jones: Myth, Song, and the 'Mighty Mind'* focuses specifically on the Chartist poet Ernest Jones who, although not labouring class himself, suggests that exploring Chartist poets on their own terms is now possible.<sup>216</sup> Most recently the July 2023 issue of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* is primarily dedicated to the contributors of the *Piston, Pen & Press* database. This features discussions about the current climate of labouring-class poetics arguing that *Piston, Pen & Press* places an emphasis on the 'quotidian, concerned with the day-to-day routines of working-class life' in which they are not 'seeking to denigrate the 'political'; rather [they] are striving to recapture as much of the complexity and variety of the working-class experience as is possible.'<sup>217</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Harris's corpus in the context of these academic trends. This will facilitate an understanding as to why his work has been relatively ignored by the vast majority of academics. The chapter concludes that despite the increasing inclusivity of the field and its move away from both the ghettoisation of labouring-class poets and notions of subjecting them to a metric of critical evaluation based on dated literary ideals, Harris continues to be ignored.

### Critical reactions to labouring-class poets in the nineteenth century

The first critics of labouring-class poets were their more established literary peers such as Lord Byron and Robert Southey. John Goodridge observes that 'the nineteenth century saw the first serious attempts to 'place' the labouring-class poets, critically and socially.'<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Simon Rennie, *The Poetry of Ernest Jones: Myth, Song, and the 'Mighty Mind'* (Legenda: Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>217</sup> Michael Sanders and Kirstie Blair, p. 391.

<sup>218</sup> John Goodridge, 'General Introduction', in *Nineteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, ed. by John Goodridge, 3 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), I ed. by Scott McEathron, pp. xiii-xxvii (p. xiii).

Byron and Southey's reactions to the work were mixed and, as might be expected, not all of these established, successful, and socially advantaged writers were especially encouraging of labouring-class attempts at poetry. In his 1809 satirical publication, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', Lord Byron dismissed established Romantic figures such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, preferring to praise Neoclassicist poets such as Alexander Pope and John Dryden. Byron also criticised what he saw as the 'present prevalent and distressing *rabies* for rhyming' and showed his contempt for *The Edinburgh Review* critics, dismissing them as a 'Hydra' that needed crushing by 'Hercules'.<sup>219</sup> When it came to working men or women who wrote poetry Byron was not any more generous than he had been to his Romantic predecessors. He expressed his amazement at the positive reviews of certain works by labouring-class poets in literary magazines like *The Edinburgh Review*:

When some brisk youth, the tenant of a stall,  
Employs a pen less pointed than his awl,  
Leaves his snug shop, forsakes his store of shoes,  
St. Crispin quits, and cobbles for the Muse,  
Heavens ! how the vulgar stare ! how crowds applaud !  
How ladies read, and literati laud !<sup>220</sup>

Byron's view on the abilities of labouring-class poets is quite damning. Contrasting the awl, which was a tool used to pierce leather, with the aspiring poet's pen suggests that he thought the perspicacity of labouring-class writing to be blunted and limited. The juxtaposition of ladies reading the verse and the literary establishment praising it is equally designed to show its inferiority. This suggests that only women, who were perceived to

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<sup>219</sup> George Gordon Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron Complete in One Volume*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt: Brønner, 1837), p. 541.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 548.

have lower intellects and reading tastes during this era, consumed the work. The implication of the second part of the sentence is that, while the existence of these texts was worthy of praise, they were not actually worth reading. Byron's comment emphasises a common perception that labouring-class poets were unable to move beyond the role of *manufacturers* of poetry as opposed to creators of it.

John Gibson Lockhart was similarly dismissive of the poet John Clare in 1820, as he comments that,

One cannot help feeling some qualms concerning the late enormous puffing of the Northamptonshire peasant, John Clare. I have never seen Clare's book, but from all the extracts I have seen, and from all the private accounts I have heard, there can be no doubt that Clare is a man of talents and a man of virtue ; but as to poetical genius, in the higher and the only proper sense of that word, I fear it would be very difficult to shew that he deserves half the fuss that has been made. Smoothness of versification and simplicity of thought seem to be his chief merits ; but alas ! in these days these are not enough to command or to justify such a sounding of the trumpet. [...] Clare has exhibited powers that not only justify but demand attention and kindness—but his generous and enlightened patrons ought to pause ere they advise him to become any thing else than a peasant.<sup>221</sup>

Gibson Lockhart's greatest concern seems to be with Clare's social status which is not befitting of a poet. Much like Byron, he is concerned that Clare's occupation as a poet is the subject of critical acclaim rather than his ability as one. Although Clare's 'smooth versification' is praised, there is an implication that the content of his work lacks sufficient

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<sup>221</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, 'Extracts from Wastle's diary', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine Vol. VII* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1820), p. 322.

substance to be seen as worthy of commendation. It is noteworthy that Lockhart feels able to offer this level of criticism without actually having read Clare's work in any detail.

A little later, in his introduction to his 1836 book, *The Lives of Uneducated Poets, to which are added, attempts in verse, by John Jones, an Old Servant* Robert Southey strikes a more inclusive note when he discusses the work of labouring-class poet John Jones. Southey's book is a series of sketches of labouring-class poets who are billed according to their occupation. Southey's justification for writing this book is that these previously neglected writers form a piece of literary history which may be forgotten. Southey observes that 'poets in low life, who with more or less good fortune had obtained notice in their day ; and here would be matter for an introductory essay, not uninteresting in itself, and contributing something towards our literary history.'<sup>222</sup> Southey follows these sketches with a more extensive selection of the poetry of the labouring-class man, John Jones. Jones was born in 1774 and, after acquiring rudimentary writing and reading skills, he spent the majority of his life as a domestic servant. In 1827, he submitted his poems to Southey, which were subsequently published. Southey's comments were kind but again dismissive of Jones' lack of erudition:

Had I consulted my own convenience, or been fearful of exposing myself to misrepresentation and censure, I should have told my humble applicant that although his [John Jones'] verses contained abundant proof of a talent for poetry, which, if it had been cultivated, might have produced good fruit, they would not be deemed worthy of publication in these times. But on the other hand, there were in them such indications of a kind and happy disposition, so much observation of natural objects, such a relish of the innocent pleasures offered by nature to the eye,

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<sup>222</sup> Robert Southey, *Lives of uneducated poets, to which are added, attempts in verse, by John Jones, an Old Servant* (London: Bohn, 1836), p. 12.

and ear, and heart, which are not closed against them, and so pleasing an example of the moral benefit derived from those pleasures, when they are received by a thankful and thoughtful mind, that I persuaded myself there were many persons who would partake, in perusing them, the same kind of gratification which I had felt.<sup>223</sup>

Southey's comment is inclusive as he acknowledges that Jones's poetry is not 'cultivated' enough to conform with current literary taste. Presumably, Southey's notion of cultivation corresponds with the idea of erudition which he either finds specifically lacking in Jones's work or believes is impossible to find due to his straitened circumstances. Although kinder than Byron and Gibson Lockhart, Southey's tone is typical of much of the criticism that labouring-class poets received from their more established and esteemed contemporaries.

These criticisms are germane to any survey of scholarship on labouring-class poetics as they show how the dominant critical viewpoints of the time were reinforced by those with material wealth, social standing, and political influence. This immediately placed writers from a more modest background into a position of supplicatory inferiority to those who would 'support' them. John Harris was no exception. As we have seen, he was supported by patrons buying his books via the subscription model and encouraging their friends to do the same. Much of Harris's energy was spent creating supplicatory friendships with people of influence so that he could publish his work. All the support Harris received hinged on the fact that his work was politically conservative and reinforced the dominant values and attitudes of the Victorian era. Harris was implicitly or explicitly seen as a manufacturer of morally instructive poetry that was a healthy influence on his labouring-class peers and a positive reflection of the values of the Victorian era, rather than an artist in his own right.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

The encouraging reviews of Harris's debut collection bear this out where, like Southey's appraisal of John Jones, the man and his values are worth promoting, but the poet is not. This extract from a review of Harris's debut collection from in *The Athenaeum* on the 4<sup>th</sup> October in 1856 makes this evident. In a section of the periodical entitled 'Minor Minstrels', Harris receives these comments:

His writing to any other age would have been a marvel, and it is a phenomenon even in our own. Of course it is sometimes quaint and homespun, often bombastic and tumid ; sometimes simply vapid and diffuse ; but generally it is earnest, strong, and sweet with a father's love and all domestic affections. [...] We subjoin a tale of a miner's heroism.[...] The recital of such deeds as these, however simply told, stirs the blood like wine, and fills us with a fuller strength.<sup>224</sup>

Much like Southey's 'moral benefits', Harris fills the reader with a 'fuller strength'. Harris's formal capabilities are dismissed. He is referred to as 'vapid' and 'diffuse'; his tales 'simply told'. This is redolent of the formal naivety implicit in Southey's description of Jones's 'innocent pleasures' which imply a childlike quality to his writing. Literary abilities and criticism were an inheritance from one privileged generation to another. Like law and politics, this established the literary taste and the subsequent debates around it.

Despite the clearly established hierarchy of labouring-class poets in the literary establishment and the ubiquity of these generous but patronising reviews of their work, there were some poets who did receive a more extensive level of critical engagement from the literary press despite their work showing much more radical leanings. Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903) was a contemporary of Harris and another self-educated miner. Much like

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<sup>224</sup> 'Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain. By John Harris, a Cornish Miner. Second Edition', *The Athenaeum*, 1510 (1856), 1201-32 (p. 1215).



Harris and other Victorian labouring-class poets, Skipsey began work at the age of 7. He was a trapper whose primary role was to open and close a door through which tubs of coal passed in a mine for sixteen hours a day. During his long employment, Skipsey taught himself to read using playbills and advertisements. When he was fifteen years old, he received his first gift of books from an uncle: the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, and Pope's *Iliad*. Once Skipsey had managed to secure a promotion, he began to buy books and furthered his process of self-education by studying poems from Shakespeare, Burns, and Blake as well as Greek, Latin, and German.<sup>225</sup>

Coming as they did from similar backgrounds, there are several similarities between Harris and Skipsey. Both men were employed in mining related occupations in relative infancy, were self-educated, and were exposed to similar formative literary texts. Despite this, their relationship with the establishment is remarkably different. Harris courted and became friends with prominent local religious and political figures in the Cornish locality. Skipsey was born in Percy Main in Northumberland and his friendship with Robert Spence Watson, a well-respected lawyer and Skipsey's biographer, seems to have established far better connections for him. Spence Watson relates an anecdote where Skipsey was invited to dine with both himself and another learned and socially advantaged friend. During the discussion, Skipsey's erudition was such that Spence Watson's friend was reported to have told him to move to London so he could engage with more congenial society.<sup>226</sup> Skipsey was also latterly courted by more established literary figures from London such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Despite the positive praise heaped on him in his lifetime, Harris never attracted encouragement, praise, or criticism from London-centric literary intellectuals. It is insightful to contrast the two mining themed poems in each man's corpus. Skipsey's first collection of poems published in 1859 is extant but it attracted the attention of a local

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<sup>225</sup> Robert Spence Watson, *Joseph Skipsey, His Life and Work* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1909), pp. 17-20.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

newspaper editor, who used his influence to get Skipsey a job as an under-storekeeper in Gateshead. It was followed by *Poems, Songs, and Ballads* in 1862. On 16 January 1862 there was a disaster at the Hartley Colliery when the beam of the pit's pumping engine broke and fell down the shaft, trapping the workers below and resulting in the deaths of 204 men and children. This disaster inspired Skipsey to write 'The Hartley Calamity' which was read at many meetings to try and raise money for the widows and orphans of the colliers who had been killed. The extract below refers to the plight of the miners who were trapped underground:

'Are we entombed?' they seem to ask,  
For the shaft is closed, and no  
Escape have they to God's bright day  
From out the night below.<sup>227</sup>

Skipsey's perception of the miners' plight is accurate but bleak. He does not invoke any platitudes about divine intervention or offer false hope to the miners or readers of his poem. In fact, Skipsey explicitly casts 'God's bright day' as something beyond their reach as they are trapped in the 'night' below. It would seem that Skipsey is casting the miners' work itself as ungodly, as God is above ground and has nothing to do with this unpleasant situation. Skipsey's use of language is ambiguous as to whether he thinks that God either knows or cares about the miners' plight as the deity appears to have little comfort to offer. This ambivalent attitude towards religious dogma is confirmed in another of Skipsey's poems, 'Stanzas' where he refers to the 'hopes that allured me | To cope with the worst' result in his contemplation of 'Death' as 'the only relief'. The 'hopes' Skipsey refers to are presumably religious. However, in the second stanza of the poem, Skipsey's soul 'sigheth'.

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<sup>227</sup> Joseph Skipsey, 'The Hartley Calamity', in *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets Volume III*, ed. by John Goodridge, 3 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), III ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, pp. 219-222 (p. 220).

Presumably Skipsey wishes to commune with God but the answer he receives offers no respite, only further pain. The ‘scream of vulture despair at his prey’ that concludes the second stanza by zoomorphising an already anthropomorphised deity.<sup>228</sup> Whether this poem is definitively about the failure of religious hope or not, Skipsey certainly takes no opportunity to take succour from the divine. Skipsey’s fatalistic politics and the individualistic attitude he portrayed is alluded to by Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge who comment that:

But Skipsey is in other ways more typical of the mineworker poets of nineteenth-century northeast England. The painful process of solitary self-education, the loneliness of the trapper-boy’s life, suggest a heroic and self-reliant individualism, yet his poetry is faithful too to the powerful communitarian cultural traditions of the northeast mining communities.<sup>229</sup>

The ‘painful process of solitary self-education’ and ‘self-reliant individualism’ that Keegan and Goodridge refer to explains Skipsey’s reluctance to rely on anyone other than himself or counsel others than any other kind of support was possible. Skipsey’s attitude towards the divine aid is negative and resentful in contrast with John Harris’s more conciliatory and hopeful approaches towards religion. Harris’s debut collection, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (1856), contains several mining themed poems that see God as a source of redemption, reward, and comfort in the most extreme circumstances. A typical example, entitled ‘The Miner’s Wife’, offered the consolation of God to a woman whose husband had been killed in a mining accident:

And now he sleeps as peacefully

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<sup>228</sup> Joseph Skipsey, *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* (Bedlington: Richardson, 1878), p. 14.

<sup>229</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, ‘Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-Century Mineworker Poets’, p. 239.

Within his humble grave,  
 And slumbers on as quietly,  
 As sleep the blazon'd brave.  
 He fell not on the battle-field,  
 By bullet or by blade,  
 Yet perish'd as a hero should :—  
 Peace to the miner's shade !<sup>230</sup>

For Skipsey, God is ambivalent about the plight of the miners who died. They are not heroes just victims. Harris affords his dead miner a place in heaven where he ‘sleeps peacefully’, rewarded for an act of heroism. Harris preferred to celebrate his fellow miners as heroes rather than become involved in the difficult business of agitating for better treatment or support. The lexical choices from my citation of Harris are conciliatory. The adverb ‘peacefully’ is further emphasised by the verb ‘slumbers’ which is almost tautologically reinforced by the adverb ‘quietly’. The word ‘peace’ is repeated in the final stanza to reinforce the sense of calmness and stillness. This is reflective of death. However, it is also very passive about a death that could have been prevented. This sense of frustration is more implicit in Skipsey’s less florid and more direct style in ‘The Hartley Calamity’ which distances the miners from God’s comfort and instead focuses on their anguish in the present moment. Likewise, in ‘Stanzas’, Skipsey appears to take no consolation from God, and he expresses the view that death is a form of escape. This contrasts with the melodrama of Harris’s poem.

Harris’s use of more melodramatic language is more typical of nineteenth-century labouring-class poetics than Skipsey’s more economical approach. John Goodridge observes that,

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<sup>230</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*, p. 62.

In the scholarly “recovery” of hidden or lost traditions like laboring-class poetry, the issue of quality is not any less important for having the potential to be raised, as it were, in bad faith. However much one wishes to resist the familiarly skeptical terminology of “minor” or “second-rate” poets, the question “Are they any good?” is still a trenchant one. One problem in trying to answer it is that within the literary hierarchies that are still widely accepted, whole generic areas of writing are regarded as being inherently inferior. I am thinking here, for example, about melodrama, the first of the literary strategies I want to consider in relation to later-nineteenth-century laboring-class poets. It is a primary example of a form that a number of laboring-class poets use, not just for its obviously popular, attention-grabbing entertainment value, but also for its potential to convey the drama of social and individual crisis.<sup>231</sup>

Goodridge’s identification of the social protest evident in melodramatic scenes shows how this genre of writing should be viewed in the context of conveying intense emotion via drama. In ‘The Miner’s Wife’, Harris’s extended tribute to an unknown, dead, and possibly apocryphal miner is a form of protest in itself. Harris is essentially using a poem of a reasonable length to draw his readers’ attention to a man who would generally have perceived to be unremarkable. In this sense, Harris is as political as Skipsey. However, Harris appears the more dated and imitative to the modern reader due to his adoption of these conventions which suffused the poetics of the era. Goodridge identifies the possible origins of literary contempt for melodrama that evolved in the Victorian era and continue to the present day observing that,

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<sup>231</sup> John Goodridge, ‘Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry’, *Criticism*, 47 (2007), 531-547 (pp. 531-32).

The founding text of the modern critical response to this kind of [melodramatic] writing is perhaps Oscar Wilde's bon mot on the famous scene in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing"; yet the powerful social protest evident in these melodramatic death scenes is undeniable.<sup>232</sup>

It would seem that the modern reader's dislike of melodrama was also echoed by some nineteenth-century critics. This review of Skipsey's collection, *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics*, by Theodore Watts-Dunton in 1878 stands at odds with the more formulaic reviews directed at the majority of labouring-class poets:

If the poet will only ask himself before he begins to write, whether he has the rarest of all gifts, the gift of speaking the truth— whether he can truly tell what he truly feels, or truly depict what he truly sees, he will be spared that waste of force that wrecks so many lives. Most likely he has not this gift. However, Mr. Skipsey has it or he could not have written thus :—<sup>233</sup>

Gibson Lockhart argued that John Clare did not deserve the attention he had received as a poet. Harris was credited as stirring 'the blood like wine' but never given any formal attention as poet. In contrast, Skipsey is credited with the gift of profundity. The encomium he receives connects his poetic vision with his formal capabilities. Watts-Dunton observes that he 'could not have written thus' if he was not as gifted as he was. Much of the work in *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* certainly jars with the passive and God-fearing nature of Harris's corpus. It is also devoid of some of the conventions of labouring-class writing that typified the genre during the nineteenth century, such as

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., pp. 533-34.

<sup>233</sup> Theodore Watts-Dunton, 'Review of *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* by Joseph Skipsey', *The Athenaeum*, 2664 (1878), 609-40 (p. 618).

melodrama. It would seem that Skipsey is being praised for a kind of prescience or an ignoring of genre conventions that is at odds with the established literary conventions of the era. This attitude has also been sustained to the present day. As has been established in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Harris was not published when he attempted such politically charged commentary. At this point, a critical debate begins to emerge depending on the viewpoint of the reviewer. A labouring-class poet's writing conforms to and shows facility with dominant literary forms which is a mark of both respect to established literary taste and erudition. Despite this, it is important to note that usually this erudition is viewed as pastiche. The thought that it could be adapted into something more hybridised and have an impact on literary taste is unthinkable. However, the alternative, and perhaps more minor, critical thread appears to be a respect for clarity and honesty, casting the labouring-class poet as a kind of savant who cannot help but speak a subjective but unvarnished set of truisms. Skipsey was feted by Rossetti who commented that his 'real-life pieces are more sustained and decided than almost anything of the same kind that I know, I mean in poetry coming really from a poet of the people who describes what he knows and mixes in'.<sup>234</sup> When examined more closely, this comment is not quite as positive as it first appears. Skipsey is being praised for explaining what he knows as opposed to his formal brilliance with metre.

Similarly, the American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow alluded to enjoying Harris's poems but distanced himself from the messy business of critical feedback. After being sent a copy of one of Harris's later collections, he offers the following cautious comment:

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<sup>234</sup> Basil Bunting, *Joseph Skipsey A Brief Biography*  
<[https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/skipsey/b\\_biographical.htm](https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/skipsey/b_biographical.htm)> [accessed 9 December 2023].

[W]hat a divine gift the benediction of song must have been to you through all your laborious life. How dark your way would have been without it! How luminous it has been with it!<sup>235</sup>

Longfellow is less keen than Rossetti to offer formal feedback, preferring to comment on the joy writing brought to Harris rather than any comments about the work itself. Harris had to make do with patronising reviews in literary periodicals during his lifetime. This was followed by a posthumous critical savaging by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1909 before he was re-evaluated by Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge in 2013. This change in attitude towards Harris was also accompanied by a more general re-evaluation of labouring-class poetics by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji in the same year.

#### Defining the labouring-class voice in Martha Vicinus's *The Industrial Muse*

After the attention from their peers in the nineteenth century, critical focus on Victorian labouring-class poets stalled significantly to a state of virtual non-existence. Martha Vicinus's book *The Industrial Muse* (1974) is the first significant piece of criticism in this area to emerge since the nineteenth century. Vicinus's book focuses on nineteenth-century working-class literature. She defines the scope of her study as

[Being] organized around the major types of working-class literature in the nineteenth century. [...] I have chosen the most dominant forms during their strongest periods in order to establish the variety and strength of working-class literature. The major areas are street literature, political writing, dialect and the

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<sup>235</sup> Newman, p. 115.



music hall. I have also included a chapter on literature imitative of the mainstream of English literature since the largest quantity of poems belongs to this category.<sup>236</sup>

The foci of Vicinus's study are very specific in what was an emerging area of academic study. She devotes chapters of her book to more marginalised areas of labouring-class writing such as dialect writing and politically motivated poetry. She then admits that 'literature imitative of the mainstream of English Literature' contains the 'largest quantity of poems' and yet summarises this whole sub-genre of writing in one chapter.<sup>237</sup> From her definition of the scope of her study, Vicinus defines the conventions of 'good' working-class literature as featuring political themes and using the dialect of working-class people. Political themes for Vicinus mean writing that agitates for the rights of labouring-class people and exposes the ill treatment of workers by the more affluent and ruling classes. An example of this would her citation of the chartist and radical Thomas Cooper (1805–1892) at the start of her book. Thomas Cooper was a labouring-class autodidact who was imprisoned for two years in jail for being involved in riots against the government. The quotation Vicinus chooses is from 'To the Young Men of the Working Classes' where Cooper instructs the proletariat as follows:

It now becomes a matter of the highest necessity, that you all join hands and head to create a literature of your own. Your own prose, your own poetry . . . would put you all more fully in possession of each other's thoughts and thus give you a higher respect for each other, and a clearer perception of what you can do when united.<sup>238</sup>

This quotation suggests that, for Vicinus, labouring-class literature worthy of study is definable as a genre that is distinct from established nineteenth-century notions of literary

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<sup>236</sup> Vicinus, p. 5.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

taste and convention. Cooper's notion of 'your own prose' and 'your own poetry' when addressing his fellow labouring-class writers suggest that, both in terms of theme and in terms of formal convention, there is an opportunity for people from more modest backgrounds to unite using literature as an instrument of social change. This may explain why Vicinus devotes a significant section of one of her chapters to Joseph Skipsey.

She offers the following evaluation of him as a poet where she praises his non-conformist and essentially non-compliant approach to writing poetry which she details below:

[F]or Skipsey nature reflects society as it is. The reader learns from the follies, rather than the perfection, of human nature as acted out by flowers and insects. [...] In spite of Dante Rossetti's advice that he continue his 'real-life pieces', such as 'Mother Wept'. Skipsey was unwilling to limit himself to poems describing working-class life, and insisted upon taking his own path. Isolated from his fellow miners, and without even the companionship of a literary club, he turned to writing poems about various abstractions — the soul's immortality, Spiritualism, Destiny and similar phenomena. Such poems as 'The Mystic Lyre', 'The Inner Conflict' and 'Omega' were never popular with his readers, but he persisted, convinced that he had found a means of expressing his innermost thoughts without betraying the inadequacies of his education or gaining the label 'pit-poet'.<sup>239</sup>

Vicinus acknowledges that Skipsey latterly diverges from his focus on labouring-class life, but she also argues his greatest strength is the clarity of his social commentary and these are the poems she chooses to focus on. The poem below, which was praised by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, helps to illustrate this argument:

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156.

Mother wept, and father sighed ;  
With delight a-glow  
Cried the lad, “ to-morrow,” cried,  
“To the pit I go.”<sup>240</sup>

The simple economy of Skipsey’s phrasing here is commensurate with the notion of a labouring-class voice. There is no figurative language and, as Vicinus observes, Skipsey reflects society as it is which is in marked contrast with Harris’s framing similar incidents in conciliatory and hopeful terms. In the citation below, the boy’s mother weeps and his father despairs but there is no redemption, only a forlorn kind of hope that is emphasised in the last stanza:

“ May he,” many a gossip cried,  
“ Be from peril kept ; ”  
Father hid his voice and sighed,  
Mother turned and wept.<sup>241</sup>

Skipsey’s repetition of the lines of the first stanza in the closing one shows the cyclical and repetitive fears of labouring-class life. The gossip’s cry that the boy be kept from peril shows the fatalism of many people from labouring-class communities. In terms of its subject, this poem could only have been written by a miner, and formally its simple and direct lexis shorn of figurative language suggests a kind of clarity sharpened by a challenging and arduous life. There is an integrity to Skipsey in this poem that helps define him as a working-class voice. This is both in terms of his thematic concerns and his formal

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<sup>240</sup> Skipsey, *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics*, p. 119.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

use of conventions. In his 2018 thesis on Skipsey, Gordon James Tait acknowledges this as a general truth about labouring-class poetics, commenting

this thesis argues that the writing of working-class individuals is shaped by their social class, and what Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) describes as cultural and social capital. These forms of capital determine the reception working-class writers receive within literary culture and, in turn, reinforce the authority of middle-class writings about working-class lives that allows them to become unchallenged orthodoxies.<sup>242</sup>

Tait's argument is that the very nature of a labouring-class background creates a form of social capital for labouring-class writers that determines their literary reception. Tait's comment suggests a kind of inevitability about the labouring-class voice which does not afford it any detachment from its conditions of origin. This is in direct contrast with the passive stoicism offered by Harris. His comments on the hardships of life in his poem 'All Things Must Change' sound like they could potentially have been written by a person who had not experienced the hardships and trauma that Skipsey describes so viscerally:

Your very old shoe which you wore ere you started,—  
You know it,—the tap from the upper has parted ;  
The irons have fled to some nook in our zone ;  
[...]  
Are scatter'd and whirl'd:— what a change has been here !<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Tait, p. 2.

<sup>243</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*, p. 163.

Unlike Skipsey, Harris does not cast the miner as traumatised by his potential death. Instead, he is mindful of his challenging situation. The use of the second person in Harris's poem shows sympathy with his fellow working man using phrases such as 'you know it' but it takes a more descriptive and less emotive tone than Skipsey. The passive accepting title of the poem 'All Things Must Change' is in direct contrast with the agitating quality of Skipsey's poem. For critics like Vicinus, this makes Harris betray his labouring-class experience as the implicit message of his poem is acceptance of challenging circumstances.

The clarity of Skipsey's writing might seem prescient to modern day taste. His writing is shorn of the melodrama and superfluous digressions and description that characterise Victorian poetry. Vicinus clarifies the origins of its linguistic stylings lay in the political activism of colliers:

The coal miners of the North-east have a complete and continuous literary tradition; the composing of songs, poems and dialogues had been an integral part of pit communities from the seventeenth century. [...] It was necessary, on the one hand, to educate the public to the similarity between the hopes and ideals of the miners and other men, and on the other, to instruct miners to behave more like other men and less like 'terrible and savage pitmen'. The literature written during this time, therefore, had the combined function of building union solidarity and self-discipline, and appealing to shared values among all men.<sup>244</sup>

Vicinus's comment about union solidarity is key here. The kind of writing Skipsey produced in 'Get Up' and 'Mother Wept' was not instructive to building union solidarity in particular, being essentially critical of the collier's life. However, in its clarity of protest, its indebtedness to literary traditions of instructiveness and clarity is evident. It is worth

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<sup>244</sup> Vicinus, p. 61.

remarking that nineteenth-century critics of Skipsey such as Rossetti may have been completely unaware of some of these literary traditions and viewed his work without this context. Unaware of his literary antecedents, they may have seen his voice as more of a negation than it actually was in formal terms. Conversely, Harris's wish to instruct and elevate his peers means he adopts a more literary and figurative style to imbue them with acceptance not agitation. His poem celebrating the development of the Man-Engine is a prime example. The Man-Engine was a rudimentary form of lift to transport miners up and down shafts into the mine. It was safer for miners than the long ladders that they had previously used, and it also allowed them to get to work quicker as they were not paid until they began:

Help of the miner brave,  
    Man-Engine, hail to thee !  
Lifting him up from Plutus' cave,  
    Light as the air and free !  
Lifting him up ! up ! up !  
    Light as the Zephyr's wing,  
So that dull Lassitude's lean form  
    Is now evanishing.<sup>245</sup>

Harris makes use of classical references by alluding to 'Plutus' cave' and the 'Zephyr's wing'. This level of erudition was meant to elevate and celebrate his peers as opposed to agitating them. Its imitativeness of literary traditions such as classical allusion also shows Harris adopting the conventions of the literary establishment and his social superiors. This makes him of much less interest to academics such as Vicinus as he is not embodying a discrete formal voice.

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<sup>245</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*, p. 154.

Vicinus's perceptions of Skipsey and poets like Harris are contradictory. She implies that Skipsey is not as interested in class mobility as conformist poets like Harris. Vicinus thinks that adopting middle-class literary conventions is betraying one's class origins. She identifies Skipsey's poem 'The Hartley Calamity' as a perfect example of his discrete labouring-class identity, saying:

Skipsey has taken a common theme of countless working-class poets — the supremacy of the poet in the face of society's indifference or hatred — and has used familiar images drawn from nature, but he has gone beyond these clichés to a new poetic sensibility. In all the poets discussed previously poetry was seen primarily as soothing and elevating; Skipsey alone mentions the possibility of fear and strength. [...] Other writers told their readers poetry could be a force for change; Skipsey shows it.<sup>246</sup>

Skipsey's writing could be argued as embodying a distinct labouring-class voice and his uniqueness makes him an obvious topic for critical appraisal. His distinct voice separates him from his more formally conservative labouring-class contemporaries. Vicinus describes these poets as 'repetitious' with 'many unfamiliar names [that] blend into a indistinguishable composite figure'.<sup>247</sup> She is dismissive of the poetic judgement of these labouring-class writers who 'judged themselves and their peers by the standards of the literary establishment; the closer they came to their favourite writers, the better they fulfilled their own expectations'.<sup>248</sup> Vicinus's disregard for this strain of labouring-class literature seems to be centred around its lack of originality. For her, labouring-class poets who adopted established literary forms were just a poor imitation of their social superiors:

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<sup>246</sup> Vicinus, p. 158.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

These [aspiring] poets were ignored by their peers, however, because they attempted to give an alien and irrelevant culture to their working-class audience. They did not take the best qualities of working-class life and make them attractive and desirable to their readers, as did dialect writers, but rather, they wished to uplift their readers into a different culture. They denied much of what their peers appreciated as literature, and offered instead a borrowed culture that aped the morals and sentiments of those holding social and political power. [...] They could expect virtually no audience among their own class outside a few fellow poetasters, and so vied for attention from sympathetic patrons and middle-class readers.<sup>249</sup>

What Vicinus seems to fail to take into account was that poets like Harris were actually offering a form of class mobility via their poetry. In a sense, she presumes Skipsey is doing the same thing by highlighting the power of poetry as protest. Harris's approach facilitates individuals towards self-improvement which potentially improves their material circumstances. Skipsey's approach, if effective in realising labouring-class action, would lead to improved working conditions and a higher standard of living, However, Skipsey's approach leaves miners in the mine albeit with more pay and safer worker conditions. In either event, change occurs but it is more likely than Harris's approach achieved much more for the self-improving individual.

It is important to acknowledge that not all labouring-class writers were political radicals and that the sheer unreceptiveness of the mainstream press and publishers to political activism at even a local level needs to be taken into consideration when dismissing the readership of such a large body of work. It also fails to take into account that some labouring-class people may have wished to have been edified by their peers who were in

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-8.



the same social strata as them. Furthermore, if some of these labouring-class writers wished to achieve publication, radical or politically motivated writing was simply not acceptable in the national or local mainstream press as it did not represent the conventional values of Victorian society.

In his autobiography, Harris himself identifies the hazards of his early attempts at politicised prose:

The first poetical composition which I prepared for the press was a polemical dialogue between a workman and his master. This was written soon after a strike for wages among some of the dissatisfied miners in a portion of my own district. I well remember how the manufacturing of this dialogue hurried sleep from my eyes for a whole night ; and when at last it was finished, I copied it upon several sheets of clean white paper, and took it to a printer at Camborne, who, after keeping it a long time, returned it with these ominous words, "I do not think it is worth printing." I know now he was quite right. Imagine my horror, however, on hearing this crushing speech, and the sadness of my soul as I climbed the old mountain to my mother's dwelling. Suffice it to say that I destroyed my poem, and never more indulged in this species of jingling ware.<sup>250</sup>

Harris does not actually give away his own politics here. Despite his dismissal of his work as 'jingling ware', it is not clear whether he supported the striking workers or not and as the poem was destroyed, it is impossible to verify. It is equally possible that the enigmatic 'I do not think it worth printing' could be from the perspective that the work was of a poor quality or that the printer disagreed with Harris's politics whatever they might have been. The phrase 'jingling' is a suggestion that catchy and repetitive rhetoric was not what Harris

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<sup>250</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 55-56.

was aiming to achieve as a serious poet. This is further reinforced by the word 'ware' which reduces his writing to a product for consumption rather than art. Harris is keen to reinforce his error by his use of hyperbole. Describing himself as destroying the poem reassures the reader of his awareness that he has made a grave mistake.

Harris is one of Vicinus's apolitical and unread poets. He is not an explicit and radical voice for change. Many of his subscribers were his social superiors as they had the money to purchase his books. However, Harris identifies several incidents where his work has been appreciated by his labouring-class peers. One example can be found in his autobiography:

The first essay of mine ever steeped in printer's ink was a dirge on the death of some miners who were accidentally killed in Carn Brea. These verses were given to a poor blind man ; and I remember with what intense joy I listened in the crowd as he sang them up and down the market at Camborne.<sup>251</sup>

In contrast with the 'jingling ware' of socialism suggested previously, the connotations of this first published piece of Harris's is one of deep reflection. It is 'steeped in printer's ink' suggesting a lengthy time of gestation. However, this could also simply be an expression to refer to the typeface being set in ink. Its acceptability to the public at large is reinforced by the fact that a man who cannot see troubled himself to memorise the work and saw fit to perform it to the general public. As Harris is not advocating for any kind of reform or change, this kind of work was completely acceptable to the public at large. This anecdote is also indicative of another issue with labouring-class poets and their peers. Not all of them were literate; not all of them could afford books. Many, much like their social superiors, may not have enjoyed poetry. Unlike Harris, Skipsey's attitude towards his

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

fellow labouring men was not one imbued with high expectations or appreciation. Vicinus says that,

Joseph Skipsey had fewer illusions about his fellow miners, and made little effort to share his poetry with them. He was in his forties before he met in Thomas Dixon another working man with whom he could share his secret hopes and intellectual ambitions. Dixon [...] sent copies of Skipsey's works to Ruskin, Rossetti, and several other Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>252</sup>

This is of course interesting when considering the reasons for this era's ubiquitous academic focus on Skipsey. Vicinus previously commented that the large majority of conservative labouring-class poets did not reproduce the best qualities of working-class life in their poetry which did not make it attractive and desirable to their peers. Instead, they preferred to attempt to move them into the more rarefied culture of the middle classes. This, she argues, led to them experiencing an extremely reduced readership of similarly inclined labouring-class poets or patrons who were inclined to sponsor the work that reiterated the dominant values of the era.<sup>253</sup> Vicinus's previous observation that Skipsey's aspirations were also literary would also suggest that he too was aiming for an audience different to his peers.<sup>254</sup> Granted, Skipsey is not a dialect writer but by implicitly damning poets like Harris as tedious and imitative who were ingratiating themselves with people in power, Vicinus places Skipsey into a liminal space where he advocates poetry as a force for change but is entirely ambivalent about effecting that change with his own peers. It would seem that Skipsey was just as concerned with social mobility as Harris.

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<sup>252</sup> Vicinus, p. 167.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

Vicinus's comments need to be viewed in conjunction with the previous nineteenth-century criticisms of Skipsey and Harris. Skipsey's contemporaneous criticism praises him for his unaffected clarity and implicit in these comments is the uniqueness of his voice and poetic vision. Vicinus takes this nineteenth-century argument further, identifying that Skipsey has a voice remarkable in labouring-class poetics because his poetry advocates for change compared with the passive conciliatory comments of his more formally imitative peers. However, Vicinus's arguments could be equally applied to Harris. As John Goodridge comments, melodrama in poetry was an established convention of labouring-class poetics and a tool of literary protest.<sup>255</sup> Harris makes use of this in his own poetry as a form of protest against forgotten miners. Harris identifies an example of his own peers singing his poems in his local town to commemorate miners who died. These are political acts which showed Harris had the respect and engagement with his peers. It is ironic to think that Skipsey is recorded as more dismissive of his colleagues with no extant records of any influence on his contemporaries. However, Skipsey is credited with the potential to have created influence and change on his fellow workers. Harris actually did so, and is implicitly relegated to being formally conservative, derivative, and unread.

In the next section of this chapter, it becomes apparent that there are other factors which may have contributed to the critical disinterest in Harris's corpus, many of which are stylistic and reflective of contemporary literary taste after Modernism.

#### D.M. Thomas: Harris's first literary editor

Towards the end of the 1970s, the Cornish author D.M. Thomas attempted to restore John Harris's individual reputation by producing a selected works with a local Cornish press in

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<sup>255</sup> Goodridge, 'Some Rhetorical Strategies in Later Nineteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poetry', p. 532.

the late 1970s. This was titled *Songs from the Earth* (1977) and was the first edition of Harris's work since the nineteenth century. In this book, Thomas re-contextualises Harris for a contemporary audience by heavy editing, suggesting in his introduction that he has 'tried, in fact, belatedly, to offer some of that help [Harris] so desperately needed when he was alive'.<sup>256</sup> In practical terms, Thomas outlines the cuts he had made to Harris's corpus:

For this selection I have made cuts in several poems, including the major decision to remove the second book of *The Land's End. A Story of Carn Brea* is the original text complete, except for a few minor excisions. I include extracts from much longer poems — ore extracted from deads.<sup>257</sup>

Deads is a mining term for waste rock of no value.<sup>258</sup> Thomas is making significant judgements about the value of parts of Harris's work. This shows that Thomas's excision of the second book of Harris's longer poem 'The Land's End' is attributable to Harris's primary emphasis on narrative as opposed to description in the second book. Thomas prefers to include Harris's more descriptive work that focuses on the natural world or mining than he does any sermonising. In the second book of the poem, he tells a story of two lovers who are separated when the man travels abroad to secure his riches as a miner. This story concludes with his accumulated wealth being lost in a shipwreck on his return. However, his lover has waited faithfully for him to return and is more concerned with him than any wealth he might have accrued. The moral message of this second book is that the man's true riches are the love of his partner. This message is emphasised in dogmatic specificity by his lover:

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<sup>256</sup> *Songs from the Earth: Selected Poems of John Harris, Cornish Miner, 1820-84*, ed. by D.M. Thomas (Padstow: Lodenek Press, 1977), pp. x-xi.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Pendeen Community Heritage, *Vocabulary of Cornish Mining Terms*. Available at: <<https://geevor.com/content/uploads/2019/05/Mining-Vocabulary-List.pdf>> [accessed 9 December 2023]

“ Lament not that thy treasure 's swallow'd up  
In greedy ocean's silent house of shells.  
Adversity may strip thee of thy all,  
And poverty may freeze thee with its frost.  
Thy love is what my hungry soul requires.  
Ay, should we crawl across this barren world  
In beggar's weeds, 'twere Eden with thy love.  
In having thee thy Eda's rich indeed.<sup>259</sup>

The overall tone of this extract is conciliatory. Harris tacitly acknowledges the debilitating state of poverty which freezes with its frost. As is usual with Harris, righteous indignation or political activism is not present. Instead, he offers the comfort of religion which substitutes for nourishment, implicit in the phrase ‘hungry soul’. Wealth is also substituted for love as the man’s emotions towards the girl are seen as more remunerative than financial gain. The Christian messages that love conquers all and that worldly riches are no virtue is the kind of moralising that Thomas appears to find unsatisfying in Harris’s work which is why he cut it. He refers to these themes specifically:

Often, particularly in the shorter poems, poetry is strangled by the didactic pressure so strong both within and around him. His books are crammed with corpses: dead pieties, Orphan Annie sentiments, anathemas of the Demon Drink etc., inert fern-fairies, and bards with harps who move and play as if weighed down with figgie hobbin.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Harris, *The Land's End, Kynance Cove and other poems*, p. 24.

<sup>260</sup> *Songs from the Earth*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. x.

Thomas's allusion to 'figgie hobbin' is referring to a lard and suet-based dish which contained figs.<sup>261</sup> The density of the lard and suet suggest that this would have been a filling meal for miners but also one that took some time to digest. This theme of heaviness and weight is continued as Thomas continues the theme of 'deads' from his previous criticism of Harris. He describes his work as 'crammed with corpses' implying further unnecessary excess. His biggest issues seem to be Harris's religious themes, his moralising, and the more fantastical qualities of his writing. For Thomas as editor, this is the chaff from which he needs to sort the wheat, He attributes Harris's didactic streak to both the external pressure of his patrons and sponsors as well as his own religious sensibility.

Conversely, the first book of 'Lands' End' contains some poetic description which is closer aligned to what Thomas appears to value in Harris's work. The opening of the poem reads:

YES, there are voices, echoes of the Past,  
That rise from old Earth's silent solitudes,  
And move along the crowded walks of men.  
They flow among the roses of the spring,  
On the stream's wavelets, in the wooing winds,  
And mid the fresh drops of the vernal shower.<sup>262</sup>

The opening of the poem is free from religious dogma instead offering a romantic and musical sense of place which, although entirely geographically non-specific, are pleasing to the ear. The soft consonant beginnings of 'wavelets', 'wooing', and 'winds' give an

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<sup>261</sup> Edith Martin, *Cornish Recipes: Ancient and Modern*, 20th edn (Truro: Netherton & Worth Ltd., 1959), p. 19.

<sup>262</sup> Harris, *The Land's End, Kynance Cove and other poems*, p. 3.

auditory sense of the weather and the masculine ending of ‘fresh’ juxtaposes with the feminine one of ‘drops’ to mimic the sound of rainfall. This is the side of Harris that appeals most to Thomas: his musicality and gift for poetic description. This viewpoint is reinforced by Thomas’s lavish praise of Harris’s descriptive sections of his poem ‘Kynance Cove’:

with its cunning transfiguration of the vowels, brightening always, in the last line:  
‘Were odes of music/lovely as the light’; very like a wave of sunlight passing over  
the cove.<sup>263</sup>

Again, this section of ‘Kynance Cove’ prefaces a similar narrative which involves religious themes, none of which are commented on by Thomas at all. As a poet himself, Thomas is either consciously or sub-consciously reflecting the taste of the era in which he was writing. Commenting on the poetic tastes of the 1970s, Helen Bailey observes:

For poetry, this preoccupation with theory and philosophy meant a growing self-consciousness about the linear, historical progression of poetic movements and reputations, and thus a tendency to be always already in search of the next ‘big thing’.<sup>264</sup>

Thomas is not necessarily presenting Harris as the ‘next big thing’ as he was in the distant past of the nineteenth century. D.M. Thomas began his writing career as a poet. His poetic publications in the 1970s began with *The Granite Kingdom* in 1970. This was an edited collection of Cornish poets that placed a small focus on John Harris. *The Logan Stone*

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<sup>263</sup> D.M. Thomas, ‘Introduction’, in *The Granite Kingdom Poems of Cornwall*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, (Truro: Tor Mark Press, 1970), pp. 9-15 (p. 14).

<sup>264</sup> Helen Bailey, ‘Two Poetries? A Re-Examination Of The ‘Poetry Divide’ in 1970s Britain’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 130-50 (p. 132).



subsequently appeared in 1971 which focused on Cornish themes with the title itself being a reference to balancing two stones on top of one another. This was followed by *The Shaft* in 1973, *Love and other Deaths* in 1975 and concluded with *The Honeymoon Voyage* in 1978. Therefore, in terms of building his own career and reputation as a poet, it may well have been instructive to both develop his own awareness of the historical progression of poetic movements as well as indicating this awareness to the public at large to enhance his reputation as an erudite poet. In essence, Thomas picks and chooses extracts and lines which suit his reconfiguring of Harris for a 1970s readership. Thomas's focus on the musical qualities of Harris's work is commensurate with the importance the Victorians placed on metre, rhythm, and sound.

A further example of Thomas's praise of Harris's linguistic sensibilities is found in his comments on 'A Story of Carn Brea':

That art is musical in its effect. ' . . .Till the moon / Slid into the midnight with her suite of stars.' ' . . .Summer was past, and in the leafless wood / Autumn lay down to die.' The images are conventional, the patterning of sound, the melody, beautiful and memorable. Nor is it petrified sound, but quickened by character and emotion.<sup>265</sup>

Thomas specifically highlights 'the combination of related consonants and dissimilar vowel-sounds' in the 'Summer was past, and in the leafless wood | Autumn lay down to die' line.<sup>266</sup> The effect this achieves is a bobbing between the vowel sounds which imitates the falling of the leaves from the trees as autumn begins. The related consonants 'down to die' are voiced emphasising the finality of autumn's passing. Harris's level of

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<sup>265</sup> *Songs of the Earth*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. viii.

<sup>266</sup> *The Granite Kingdom Poems of Cornwall*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. 14.

accomplishment seems to be ignored by much contemporary academic formal criticism during this era and to the present day.

A further and more extreme example of Thomas extracting ‘ore from deads’ is his editing of Harris’s long poem, ‘Christian Heroism’. Thomas excises the majority of the poem, focusing again on a descriptive section of the poem. The overarching narrative of the poem ‘Christian Heroism’ is a poem that initially focuses on celebrating John Wesley’s visit to Cornwall in 1793; this is then followed by a series of domestic vignettes which celebrate Christian behaviour and values. The poem then concludes with a narrative about two miners – one of whom sacrifices his life to save the other. It appears impossible for Harris to miss an opportunity to include a religious reference and he attributes the line, ‘Escape; I shall be in heaven in a minute!’, to the miner who sacrificed himself to save the other. Out of this eleven-page poem, Thomas chooses to preserve one page and retitles this section ‘The Mine’:

Hast ever seen a mine ? Hast ever been  
Down in its fabled grottoes, wall'd with gems,  
And canopied with torrid mineral-belts,  
That blaze within the fiery orifice ?  
Hast ever, by the glimmer of the lamp,  
Or the fast-waning taper, gone down, down,  
Towards the earth's dread centre, where wise men  
Have told us that the earthquake is conceived,  
And great Vesuvius hath his lava-house,  
Which burns and burns for ever, shooting forth  
As from a fountain of eternal fire ?<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*, pp. 42-3.

This section's appeal has much in common with other extracts of Harris's work that Thomas has singled out for critical praise. Harris's use of repetition of rhetorical questions prefixed with 'hast' is accompanied by further alliteration, and further repetition creates a tangible sense of descent in the poem. It is this visceral feeling that Harris generates on the reader which seems to please Thomas. Rather than viewing in the context of the more religiously dogmatic sections that frame it, Thomas chooses to excise it to present the side of Harris that is more in line with modern day literary conventions of brevity.

Thomas's severe excision of Harris's corpus also needs to be viewed in the context of developments in poetry in the 1970s. The 1973–75 recession had cut funding for poetry and the arts quite severely and Helen Bailey comments that,

Not least among these pressures was the economic downturn that hit the UK in the early 1970s. In such difficult financial conditions, not unlike those of today, it was inevitable that the arts—and poetry in particular—were forced to retrench and justify their value.<sup>268</sup>

If the contemporary poetry scene of the 1970s was struggling to justify itself, it would follow that Thomas felt an acute pressure to explain his presentation of Harris by displaying his most accomplished writing. At this point, it is also worth considering that Thomas has a considerable output as a writer – the vast majority of which had been placed with larger national presses throughout his writing career. His selection of John Harris's poetry was published by Lodenek Press: a regional press based in Padstow. The fact that he chose to use a small regional publisher or was unable to attract the attention of a larger one could well be an indication of the challenges of drawing people's attention to a

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<sup>268</sup> Helen Bailey, p. 131.

labouring-class nineteenth-century writer. This meant that he had to ensure the most dynamic and interesting parts of Harris's corpus were presented to the reader. If Thomas had been afforded the opportunity to produce a scholarly edition of Harris for a larger publisher, he would have been less exclusive when presenting Harris's work. This would also have afforded him the opportunity to provide a wider contextual explanation and exploration of his corpus in the context of the nineteenth century.

As a poet, Thomas's taste — informed, like all contemporary audiences, by the literary trends of modernism and post-modernism — really reduces Harris to a series of heavily edited poems and certain praiseworthy lines. Thomas wishes to highlight Harris's technical facility as a poet which is a pleasing evolution from the majority of contemporaneous criticism Harris received completely ignored any of his abilities as a poet. Ironically though, much of what Thomas removes embodies the reason Harris was published in the first instance and did receive critical attention from the literary press. By reducing Harris to a selection of musical pieces of poetic description, Thomas is viewing Harris's corpus completely out of context, wanting him to be a different poet to the one he actually was.

Thomas's attempts to establish Harris as a poet of interest in the late 1970s were short lived in terms of gaining Harris any further critical attention. The 1980s and 1990s were to see a continued focus on labouring-class poets who were overtly political or were able to transcend historical discourse due to their treatment of universal themes.

The renewed focus on politically radical labouring-class literature: labouring-class poetics and criticism from the 1990s to the present day

Towards the end of the 1980s, Peter Scheckner published *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s–1850s*. Chartist poets were members of a political people’s movement which demanded universal suffrage and annual elections amongst other socialist ideas. This anthology is surprising in its specificity as it covers a relatively niche area where so much other conventional labouring-class writing of the era had received little to no critical treatment. Scheckner explains his rationale for this particular area of focus:

Chartist verse was primarily written by industrial or artisan workers—the great majority of whom were self-educated—and printed in Chartist magazines, journals, and newspapers. [...] Perhaps the most enduring aspect of Chartist poetry then and now is that it represented an alternative, working-class culture. Chartist poetry expressed values, ideas, and a social system that sharply contrasted with a culture dominated by the Church, by a fading aristocracy, and by an emerging middle class— all at one time or another bitter foes of the Chartists.<sup>269</sup>

Scheckner’s observation about the ‘alternative, working-class culture’ builds on Vicinus’s previous comments in the 1970s about the focus of scholarship on labouring-class poetics. This tendency to specialise and focus on an extremely niche area of labouring-class poetics that is politically themed and contrary to the era’s established values and conventions is entirely typical of much academic scholarship until the turn of the twentieth century.

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<sup>269</sup> Scheckner, p. 16.

As criticism of labouring-class poetics moved into the '90s, Brian Maidment published *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-Taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain* (1992). This book anthologises poetry from a large number of Victorian writers who he collectively describes using a number of terms—‘poets of humble birth’, ‘uneducated poets’, ‘industrial poets’, ‘regional poets’, ‘auto-didacts’, and ‘artisan writers’— before concluding that the ‘most obvious term would be ‘working class writers.’<sup>270</sup> Maidment’s selection does not feature Harris. Despite this, the contents of Maidment’s anthology are focused on what he terms ‘Chartists and Radicals’, ‘Parnassians’, ‘Lowly Bards and Homely Rhymers’, and ‘The Defence of the Dialect’.<sup>271</sup> The section on the ‘Parnassians’ is primarily focused on labouring-class poets with literary aspirations. However, much like Vicinus and Scheckner, he alters the field from an historical perspective by promoting groups of writers who were operating outside of mainstream ideologies. However, in terms of the body of labouring-class poetics, these kinds of writers are a relative footnote. In the opening to the Parnassians section, Maidment observes the challenges of the corpus of mainstream labouring-class writing:

In this chapter I have set myself the impossible task of illustrating that huge body of poetry produced by working men and self-taught writers, written without specific political attention or affiliation, but with some ambition to distinguish the author as a highly cultured, distinctive, and intellectual member of his (or, very occasionally, her) class. These poems all suggest an endeavour on their authors’ part to step beyond the cultural constraints of working-class life into a more ambitious, even universal and trans-historical, poetic discourse.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Maidment, ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

<sup>271</sup> Brian Maidment, ‘Contents’, in *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught poets and poetry in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Brian Maidment (Manchester: Carcarnet, 1987; repr. 1992), pp. 5-10.

<sup>272</sup> Maidment, ‘Parnassians’, p. 97.

This comment is a progression from Vicinus's explicit dismissal of the vast body of work from more conservative labouring-class writers in the 1970s. However, it also has much in common with Sheckner's approach as it privileges minority groups of labouring-class poets. These are promoted to the reader in a materially disproportionate fashion as the only interesting examples for critical study.

In 1994, Harris's biographer Paul Newman makes some similar comments to Brian Maidment's regarding labouring-class authors who sought to distinguish themselves as 'highly cultured' but who also wished to place their own voice into the era's poetic discourse:

Harris took great pains to write in clear, standard English, purged of colloquialism or dialect [...] but one can still detect beneath the surface the rougher music of a blunt, unaffected countryman, who relies upon native observation and pithy economies of phrasing as well as non-conformist rhetoric.<sup>273</sup>

Newman clarifies that Harris adopted established literary styles for all of his poetry. This needs to be viewed in the context of Maidment's suggestion that identifying writers who have stepped beyond the constraints of working-class life to enter into universal or transhistorical course is an attribute that makes them worthy of critical appraisal. In this case, it is worth questioning whether Newman's comments that Harris's 'pithy economies of phrasing' and 'non-conformist rhetoric' make his writing distinctive enough to be worthy of academic focus. Maidment's comment that discovering all of the labouring-class poets who transcend historical discourse as 'impossible' would indicate that Harris has again been overlooked. Skipsey is included in Maidment's collection in both the 'Chartists

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<sup>273</sup> Newman, p. 73.

and Radicals’ and ‘The Parnassians’ sections.<sup>274</sup> This recurring focus on Skipsey is indicative of the very narrow number of writers who have been admitted to the canon of labouring-class poetics. Maidment’s statement about ‘impossibility’ suggests a reluctance to widen this field of writers and one has to wonder whether academics have not brought new writers to the field due to the extremely limited number of politically radical poets that truly feature in labouring-class poetics. Furthermore, I would argue that in this era of critical discourse, there had not been a real attempt to include labouring-class poets who used established literary forms. Although, practical sounding on first impression, Maidment’s notion of transcending historical discourse is pompous.<sup>275</sup> Dialect writers are included in his anthology despite their high degree of historical context from a socio-linguistic perspective which does not transcend historical discourse and is actually a part of it. It seems the bar is set much higher for labouring-class poets with literary aspirations. They are only fit for inclusion if they are the equivalent of Arnold, Tennyson, or Browning.

Vicinus’s and Maidment’s targeted approach to labouring-class poetics from the 1970s to the 1990s is understandable when one acknowledges the sheer volume of poets identifiable as labouring class. This has been made nowhere more evident than in John Goodridge’s online database of labouring-class poets which began in 2001. The database represents

all the poets of humble origins we have discovered who lived within the period anywhere in the British Isles (but see the cautions given about our often limited knowledge of Irish and Welsh poets, below), together with a very small number of poets from North America and other countries.

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<sup>274</sup> Maidment, ‘Introduction’, pp. 6-7.

<sup>275</sup> Maidment, ‘Parnassians’, p. 97.



It includes some ‘possibly’ or ‘partially’ self-taught labouring-class figures (for examples, middle class women who had fallen into poverty and in some sense identified themselves with the labouring-class tradition, or individuals about whom little is known, where there are clues that they may be of humble origins), and a few others who are included for comparative purposes (for example, the fact that they were presented, like many of the labouring-class poets, as poetical ‘novelty acts’—boy poets, blind men and women, ‘wandering minstrels’, etc.). Inclusions which are dubious, for these or any other reason, begin with a question mark.

Beyond this caution, we have aimed to be inclusive rather than exclusive, and list many figures who are tentatively identifiable as part of a labouring-class tradition. Our purpose is to discover and recover what we regard as an important and extensive tradition that has been hidden or marginalised, and we have purposely cast our nets wide in order to get a full picture of what exists and what may prove relevant.<sup>276</sup>

Goodridge’s lack of exclusivity is worth quoting in full and in his own words because it denotes an important shift in the critical dynamic of labouring-class poets where a more inclusive approach is emerging. Goodridge offers a succinct summary of his intentions with the project in 2023:

The idea of the Catalogue of Labouring-Class Poets started life 30 years ago with a list of ‘500 Poets Not in *DNB*’, sent off to trouble the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) catch-up volume, *Missing Persons*, following an appeal for names in the *Times Literary Supplement*. (Her successors, incidentally, are now rapidly adding labouring-class poets to the *Oxford Dictionary of National*

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<sup>276</sup> John Goodridge, ‘Introduction’, *Laboring-Class Poets Online*.

*Biography* [ODNB].) It took further shape around the millennium, when the group of editors brought together to compile the six-volume Pickering and Chatto series, *English Labouring-Class Poets*, decided to pool individual notes and data on labouring-class poets, which I gathered onto my computer. As the *Database of Labouring-Class Poets*, it slowly expanded, and was worked on by Tim Burke during his time as a re- searcher at Nottingham Trent University, and later by graduate students working with Bridget Keegan at Creighton University in Omaha. Tim introduced the idea of the ‘extended entry’, exemplified in his careful account of John Keats’s complex relationship to the tradition. This was an important development, since it drew the project towards becoming a more discursive and text-based resource, rather than a formal factual/statistical database: the name change to ‘Catalogue’ that came much later would reflect this shift in direction from a formally structured list to something more like a series of mini-essays. The Creighton students created a spin-off project, ‘Labouring-Class Poets Online’ (LCPO: <https://lcpoets.wordpress.com/introtobibliography/>), a lively website combining ‘extended’ entries with blog posts and background materials.<sup>277</sup>

This differs quite radically from the ideas expressed by Maidment in the early 1990s where labouring-class writers had to transcend historical discourse to be worthy of inclusion. The fact that Goodridge’s database of labouring-class poets offers over seventy labouring-class writers with published works under the letter ‘A’ contextualises the highly specific approach taken by previous scholars of labouring-class poetics. The fact that it also contains an entry on William Blake who considered himself uneducated shows that Goodridge casts his net very wide indeed to include established poets as well as those who

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<sup>277</sup> John Goodridge, ‘A Catalogue of Labouring-Class and Self-Taught Poets, c. 1700–1900: A Reflection’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 468–473 (p. 468).

may have just been published by a newspaper a couple of times. It goes some way to explaining Vicinus's dismissal of imitative work and Maidment's attempt to identify more conventional labouring-class Victorian poets who transcended the era's discourse.

The database offers the following comments on Harris's corpus and then latterly details any extant critical attention he received from the time of his death to the present day:

Harris, John (1820-84), of Camborne, Cornwall, copper miner, worked in Dolcoath mine, wrote for magazines, including essays on the land question; pub. *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* (1853); *The Mountain Prophet, The Mine, and Other Poems* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1860); *A Story of Carn Brea, Essays, and Other Poems* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1863); *Monro* (London and Falmouth: Hamilton, Adams and Co., and The Author, 1879); *Linto and Loner* [and other poems] (London and Falmouth, 1881); *My Autobiography* (London, Falmouth and Exeter, 1882)—includes a photograph. Ref: *ODNB/DNB*; John Gill, *John Harris, the Cornish Poet: a lecture on his life and works* (Falmouth and Penryn, 1891); Burnett et al (1984), no. 304; Vincent, 14, 151, 182, 194; Wright, 231-3; Reilly (1994), 211-12; Reilly (2000), 207-8; Sutton, 436 (letters); Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge, 'Modes and Methods in Three Nineteenth-Century Mineworker Poets', *Philological Quarterly*, 92: 2 (2013), 225-50; *The John Harris Society Newsletter*; [www.johnharrissociety.org.uk/](http://www.johnharrissociety.org.uk/).<sup>278</sup>

Harris's entry in the database is larger than many of the other entries. For example, the poet cited above him, Francis Harper, is indicative of the size of the average entry:

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<sup>278</sup> Goodridge, 'Static Updates of the Database of Labouring-Class Poets', p. 101.

Harper, Francis (b. 1865), of Feughs Glen, Aberdeen, farm worker, pub. poems in newspapers. Ref: Edwards, 6, 344-7. [S]<sup>279</sup>

As these two entries make immediately apparent, it is Harris's publishing history that gains him the larger entry. This is despite the fact that several of Harris's poetry collections are missing from it. There is also a brief summary of some of the interest Harris has received after his death. John Gill's lecture is mentioned as well as Goodridge's own critical enquiry into Harris with Bridget Keegan. Again, there are publications missing here, including D.M. Thomas's *Songs of the Earth* from 1977. Goodridge's database was an important development in labouring-class poetics, particularly for the present discussion, as it details Harris's publications alongside existing criticism. This approach facilitates a widening of the field that removes the relentless focus on poets who were political radicals and allows a more historicist exploration of poets by region, publishing history or occupation. It is also important to comment here on the limitations of Goodridge's database. He says that

Our first desire for the project was, so to speak, primitive capital accumulation: we wanted to gather in as many poets as possible, and thus to *prove* by overwhelming numbers that there was indeed an extensive tradition of labouring-class poetry, and not just a few freaks and oddities, as the more old-fashioned kinds of literary histories would suggest. I must admit the habit of enthusiastic number-counting is a hard one to give up, as witness the figures I give above.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Goodridge, 'A Catalogue of Labouring-Class and Self-Taught Poets, c. 1700–1900: A Reflection', p. 469.

Goodridge's 'primitive capital accumulation' is an important act for the field of labouring-class poetics as it documents the sheer extensiveness of the field. The figures Goodridge alludes to in 2023 emphasise that from 2015 in 'six years [the database] has expanded from 130,000 words to just over half a million, and from 1850 named entries to 2370'. The issues with the database lie with the fact that despite the fact of all its encompassing inclusivity and some of its extended biographical entries on individual poets, there is no consistent or thorough critical engagement with the poetry itself or any attempts to anthologise it. Publications are alluded to and links are made between authors but the vast majority of this work remains in the shadows, devoid of republication or critical treatment.

In 2007, Florence Boos began to challenge the notion of formal imitation in labouring-class poets that had been previously dismissed by Vicinus and Maidment as aspirational pastiche, commenting that 'Victorian working-class poetry also appealed to specifically *British* traditions, [...] influenced by the eighteenth-century pastoralism of Cowper, Ferguson, Gray or Crabbe, as well as the reformist romanticism of Burns, Byron, Shelley and the early Wordsworth.'<sup>281</sup> Boos's argument is important because she explains that the labouring-class poetics of the nineteenth century are influenced by previous literary traditions as opposed to being imitative of them.

Harris's literary influences were a composite of eighteenth-century pastoralism and reformist romanticism. Harris had read many of the authors listed by Boos and often quoted to them to illustrate precepts and demonstrate his erudition as well as acknowledging their influence on his work. On the title page of *Luda: A Lay of the Druids* (1868) he cites Shelley's poem 'Rarely, rarely, comest thou' to frame his depictions of the

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<sup>281</sup> Florence Boos, 'Working-Class Poetry', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002; repr. 2007), pp. 204-228 (p. 224).

sublime that litter the poem's religious overtones.<sup>282</sup> Furthermore, in his introduction to *Shakspeare's Shrine, An Indian Story, Essays and Poems*, Harris is quick to acknowledge Burns as a primary and powerful influence: 'THE first poetical work which I remember to have read, and which fired my young fancy, being then a boy of only about eight or nine years of age, was an old copy of Burns's "Saturday Night," which I found among some old books on a high shelf belonging to my father. Though it was somewhat difficult to understand its meaning in the Scotch dialect, yet, by repeatedly perusing it, I was enabled to do so, which filled me with much delight.'<sup>283</sup> Harris's acknowledgement of his literary predecessors is important. Burns was an enormously popular and respected poet, who came from a humble background. The inspiration Harris took from poets who were established and helped to define literary taste is an entirely normal process for a writer. Tennyson's corpus is influenced by the Romanticism of the late eighteenth century, but he is not viewed as derivative by literary critics. However, when Harris and other labouring-class writers make use of established literary styles and forms, they are dismissed as derivative. Boos's acknowledgement of this apparent double standard is significant.

During the nineteenth century, some of Harris's contemporaneous critics saw his literary influences as a strength of his writing. *The Lincolnshire Chronicle* offered the following comments about his collection *The Story of Carn Brea, Essays and Poems* in their review on May 22nd, 1863:

No person can peruse the simple and touching 'Story of Carn Brea' without feeling convinced that Mr. Harris is as true a poet as John Clare, Thomas Miller, and other children of the coy but witching muse. Poetry breathes in every line of the tale. In

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<sup>282</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, title page.

<sup>283</sup> John Harris, *Shakspeare's Shrine, An Indian Story, Essays and Poems* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co, 1866), p. 3.

that calm contemplative love of nature which distinguishes the poetry of Cowper and Wordsworth, our poet is indeed rich.<sup>284</sup>

Harris is likened by this reviewer to other labouring-class poets here in terms of content, or truth. He is also credited with having the qualities of Cowper and Wordsworth when writing about nature. Even if Harris were to be entirely imitative, there is an argument that this hybridisation of different types of influence is innovative in itself.

Boos is also astute about the gaps in the foci of labouring-class poetics at this time. In her 2008 publication, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, she observes when referring to the uneven attention paid to female working-class writers that

the many lacunae that remain pose some persistent questions.

Why, for example, has so much more poetry (apparently) been preserved from some regions than from others—Scotland, for example, as opposed to Wales or Cornwall?<sup>285</sup>

Boos's comment acknowledges that some geographical areas seem to have a prevalence of poetry which has been apparently preserved. This is ironic when one considers that Harris's singular status in the nineteenth century allows to him to be referred to as 'The Cornish Poet' and yet he has remained critically ignored. This is despite the fact that there is a relative paucity of output from Cornwall compared with other areas. It might be suggested that this should have drawn attention towards Harris as opposed to leaving him critically ignored.

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<sup>284</sup> 'Opinions of the Press', Harris, *Shakspeare's Shrine, An Indian Story, Essays and Poems*, pp. 1-12 (p. 4).

<sup>285</sup> *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Florence Boos, p. 16.

In *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry* (2008), Bridget Keegan makes some arguments about labouring class poetics and influence quite forcefully, saying:

I will argue throughout what follows that by using language comparable to that of ‘polite’ authors, labouring-class poets are not demonstrating a false consciousness or bad faith towards their humble origins, by denying their ‘closeness to nature’ and mindlessly parroting the abstract distances of the gentlemen poets. Instead, even more so than the polite poets whom they are said to imitate, they remind us that any expression or exploration of our relationship to nature engages with a set of symbolic practices that at once alienate us from nature even as they try and connect us with it. Many of the poets discussed in the following chapters master the conventions [...] but also transform them, producing what might be called hybrid discourse<sup>286</sup>

Keegan’s argument is an effective reminder that the ways in which people relate to the natural world are defined by their humanity not their social background. Harris and his labouring-class peers were not copying the responses of their literary betters; they were responding to the natural world as human beings. This can also be viewed in conjunction with the idea that labouring-class writers who mastered the Victorian formal conventions made skilful use of them in their writing to outstanding effect. When placed together, these two ideas offer a reading of more Parnassian labouring-class writers which imbue them with a high degree of originality. Their labouring-class professions, such as mining or farming, often meant they had an alternative and arguably more intimate relationship with the natural world. This meant that their thoughts and feelings would have been different from writers from socially superior backgrounds who did not experience the natural world

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<sup>286</sup> Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 7.



in the same way. This can be seen in the extract below where Harris describes the experience of climbing out of a mine in the evening:

Ladder after ladder, ladder after ladder, until they seemed interminable, and the top one would never be reached. Panting and perspiring, after stopping again and again, we reached the top at last, where the pure air of heaven fanned our foreheads and filled our lungs with new life<sup>287</sup>

The relief Harris must have experienced to be in the natural world can only have heightened his appreciation of it. The repetition in this citation only serves to emphasise the sheer level of exhausting drudgery of working underground. To be met with the ‘pure air of heaven’ must have seemed like a daily rebirth. This is something that Harris emphasises when he observes that his ‘lungs were filled with new life’.

The sheer level of exhilaration and musicality with which Harris writes about the natural world has already been identified by D.M. Thomas earlier in this chapter. This in itself is sufficient to imbue writers like Harris with a perspective that is distinct from the majority of middle-class literary taste makers. However, the fact that Harris then uses established literary styles to communicate this viewpoint offers a further level of hybridisation where established literary taste is used to communicate an original and distinct viewpoint. John Harris’s son, the schoolteacher John Howard Harris, offers the critical comment that his father’s ‘mastery over the Spenserian or Byronic stanza is perfect. He has written several of his later poems in this measure.’<sup>288</sup> Although the case for nepotism can be made here, it is quite plausible that this criticism is not without a degree of informed judgement.

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<sup>287</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 38.

<sup>288</sup> John Howard Harris, *John Harris, The Cornish Poet. The Story of his Life*. (London: Partridge & Co., 1885), p. 78.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that John Harris's reputation has been neglected due to previous trends in studies of labouring-class poetics which have privileged thematic notions of revolt, rebellion, and dissent over the core skills of craft and mastery of established literary forms. This is in many senses a core debate in literature. In the introduction to his book, *Modernism* (2007), Michael H. Whitworth summarises some key arguments from M.K. Spears:

There are two primary impulses in modern literature, both always present but one or the other dominating. The first is the drive towards aestheticism, toward the purification of form, its refinement and exploration, the development of those features that are most distinctive. The illusion becomes more convincing and self-sufficient; there is a tendency for the art-world to become separate and independent from life. This is countered by the opposing impulse, to break through art, destroy any possibility of escape to illusion, to insist that the immediate experience, the heightening of life is the important thing.<sup>289</sup>

Spears is discussing the tensions in modernist literature. I would argue that these two tensions also co-exist in academic approaches towards nineteenth-century literature. The Parnassian aspirations of Harris and his labouring-class contemporaries have often focused on refining established literary forms and using these to explore their own relationship with topics as diverse as nature, religion, and the mechanical processes of industry. The opposing impulse present in poets such as Joseph Skipsey and the Chartists to destroy illusions and present things as they really are is also entirely valid. Indeed, in 2011 Mike Sanders's publication *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* explores the transformative qualities of Chartist literature, commenting on poetry's 'creative capacities;

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<sup>289</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, 'Introduction', in *Modernism*, ed. by Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 3-60 (p. 8).

its ability to imagine things differently.<sup>290</sup> Sanders is referring to the agency of this kind of poetry to affect a transformation of consciousness. It would seem at this point that the opening of the field begun by Goodridge in 2001 is beginning to bear fruit. Boos's focus on female labouring-class writers in 2008 has now moved to a closer examination of the more politicised poets identified by Vicinus in the 1970s.

Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge's essay 'Incessant Toil and Hands Innumerable' gives John Harris his first piece of academic criticism since 1909. Keegan and Goodridge begin their essay by establishing that some writers with less overtly politicised aspirations have been potentially overlooked in previous investigations into labouring-class poetics.

Vicinus focuses on how Victorian miners' unions used literature, in particular poetry, for a variety of purposes, including building solidarity and representing the miners' conditions in a way that would stir bourgeois sympathies. She argues that their writing is best understood as propaganda, literature as a means to an end; thus she does not discuss the great body of work produced by miners who had more Parnassian aspirations, to use Brian Maidment's valuable characterization.<sup>291</sup>

Although uncritical of Maidment's extremely limited definition of what constitutes a labouring-class Parnassian poet, Keegan and Goodridge are right to correlate the sense of direct purpose in more politicised writing where self-expression and exploration of more nuanced ideas are side lined for the sake of clarity and direct communication. In response to this and at odds with previous academic thinking, Keegan, and Goodridge outline their more inclusive approach. They provide no comparison between the two men, preferring to evaluate the formal and thematic approach of each according to his own context. Keegan

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<sup>290</sup> Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History*, p. 13.

<sup>291</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 225.

and Goodridge consider each poet on their own merits as opposed to measuring them against their political radicalism or whether either poet has achieved a distinct and original labouring-class voice:

Having inventoried and partially analyzed the works of 1700 laboring-class poets writing and publishing in the British Isles during the period between 1700 and 1900, we contend that for mineworkers especially, labor is not just the context these poets wrote within (and often against). Rather, the activity of mining actively shapes the verse's content and form. We have identified approximately 45 laboring-class poets who were associated, in one way or another, with the mining industry; we have looked at about a third of these writers in detail. This essay will examine three poets [including John Harris] whom we cannot claim definitively to be "representative," but whose work may provide the foundation for identifying significant trends and concerns among this particular subgroup of laborer poets.<sup>292</sup>

The word representative is key here: Keegan and Goodridge are moving away from the former notion of canonising certain poets due their political agenda and beginning to consider poets as representative rather than definitive.

Keegan and Goodridge explore Harris's representation of mining in his work focusing primarily on the earlier sections of his corpus that were more influenced by mining such as *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain, The Mountain Prophet, the Mine and other Poems* as well as his later autobiographical work *Monro*. Harris's positive depiction of miners is commented on, as well as the technical level of detail in his work which he strives to make relevant to a wider audience. Harris's sentimental qualities are discussed thus:

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., pp. 225-26.

Harris's longest poem devoted to his primary occupation, "The Mine" (1860), is part sentimental tale, of starving parents and a son forced to emigrate, and part tale of triumph, of virtue, self-help, and hard work rewarded. The protagonist, through his faith and his ingenuity, rises to prosperity by finding a rich vein of tin ore. Although these elements are sentimentally presented, such a plot is not "unrealistic."<sup>293</sup>

The fact that Harris is not dismissed as sentimental here is important as it credits the integrity of his story by placing his writing into historical context. It is also a challenge to previous critics such as Vicinus who claimed that writers like Harris, 'did not take the best qualities of working-class life and make them attractive and desirable to their readers'.<sup>294</sup> Harris is representing life as it really was not an idealised version of it that is interesting and palatable to subsequent academics. Yet again, Harris is being credited for his accurate rendering of labouring-class life which suggests his primary virtue is again one of historical accuracy as opposed to other potential literary accomplishments.

Harris's Parnassian aspirations are also identified by Keegan and Goodridge for the first time with a less patronising acknowledgement of the challenges of being a labouring-class autodidact:

The contrast between the hard-labor dismal surroundings and the protagonist's Parnassian aspirations is striking even as he tries to combine both activities, composing while he wields the hammer, or writing on the miner's tools, as Harris had done as a young boy.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>294</sup> Vicinus, p. 168.

<sup>295</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 235.

Rather than being dismissive of Harris for being imitative, Keegan and Goodridge acknowledge that the time Harris spends understanding established literary styles is a testament to his commitment as a writer as opposed to his lack of imagination in not writing in working-class dialect.

Keegan and Goodridge also make observations about the political aspects of Harris's work.

Harris sees his duty as a poet not to advocate for social change, but to emphasize the sentimental, perhaps in hopes the tale ['The Unsuccessful Miner'] will move someone who will take a more activist position.<sup>296</sup>

Keegan's and Goodridge's observations need to be viewed in the context that Harris's earlier attempts at socialistic prose were rewarded with a refusal to be published. Not all forms of rebellion are always classifiable as open defiance and sometimes a system is best subverted from within. Therefore, their observation that Harris perhaps 'hopes the tale will move someone who will take a more activist position' is true inasmuch as, at this point in his career, Harris could achieve publication with such a political voice. He had no Chartist or radical political affiliations, and his guiding principles were informed by Christianity. Despite Keegan's and Goodridge's comments, in one of Harris's later collections of short stories, he shows that he might not be as passively accepting of the hardships of the working man as Keegan suggests.

The extract below is from Harris's 1887 short story, 'Ally Ardwick, The Barm Seller':

Dick Ardwick was seized with rheumatism, racking and raging in every joint. He could not work more than half his time, and the other half he spent in bed, or sitting

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

by the chimney-fire. His master, seeing he could get but little more out of him, reduced his weekly pay to such a small fraction, that it was scarcely possible for him and Ally to keep body and soul together. Reader, this great cruelty cannot go unmarked in heaven, the frightful catalogue shooting bolts of terror into many an alarmed heart at the last day. Old Dick Ardwick's working-time was over, his strength exhausted, and he lay like a battered barque upon the shore, which the next great wave might force into fragments never to be gathered together again. But what cared his employer? He had reaped the full fruition of his youth, and the glory of his manhood ; and now, when he was no longer of any use, he might sink or swim, or beg or borrow, for any sympathy which might actuate his heart.<sup>297</sup>

The social commentary is evident here. Harris begins by explicitly criticising Dick Ardwick's master according to his own religious convictions observing that 'this great cruelty cannot go unmarked in heaven'. This suggests that Harris expects some evening of the score for those who exploit others, even if this is in heaven. Even the conventionally mild Harris cannot resist damning rhetorical questions beginning with a conjunction to emphasise the disinterest employers had in their employees when they were no longer of use. As I have mentioned previously, it is interesting that the more socially aware and more overtly critical Harris emerges when he has stopped working as a miner and is employed as a scripture reader in Falmouth. This means that he is able to take some of these risks without risking being made unemployed for his critical views. It is worth remembering that the opinionated and not necessarily politically conservative miner may have been present under the surface all along.

This democratic approach to evaluating labouring-class poets was continued in 2013 by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji in *Class and the Canon*. They consider labouring-class

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<sup>297</sup> Harris, *Tales and Poems*, pp. 36-37.

poetics from a more inclusive perspective. Blair rightly acknowledges that the field of scholarship has begun to open up but also offers the following qualifying comments:

The effort to push the labouring-class poet into a particular mould is not unique to eighteenth and nineteenth-century critics and patrons, from Southey onwards. As noted above, twentieth and twenty-first century critics have productively engaged in attempts to define a canon of labouring-class poetry and poetics, as well as trying to introduce this poetry into the classroom and make it part of the institutionalized 'canon' of texts taught to undergraduate students. The most recent criticism, however, is often notable for its attempts to complicate perceptions of labouring-class poets as valuable for the 'authenticity' of their representation of 'class-specific labour experience'<sup>298</sup>

Blair is entirely correct to identify previous critical approaches which have labelled labouring-class poets as homogenous group who need to be grouped into a genre and treated as a literary representation of labouring-class life. The notion of authenticity is problematic as it reduces a person's engagement with poetic practice as solely informed by their class status which implicitly suggests that all of their interiority is informed by their lack of social or economic advantage. Blair goes on to explain the necessity for widening this field and treating writers from labouring-class backgrounds on their own terms:

The relationships between labouring-class poets and more established writers, their appropriations of form and language, their allusiveness, are important in this critical shift, and are crucial in many of the essays in this collection. Examining such relationships can also have the effect of restoring to our view poems by

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<sup>298</sup> Kirstie Blair, 'Introduction', in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900*, ed. by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-15 (p. 6).



labouring-class writers that might previously have been dismissed as ‘Parnassian’, derivative, or as less relevant to our concerns because of their apparent lack of political force and biographical reference.<sup>299</sup>

Blair’s observations regarding ‘political force’ and ‘biographical reference’ neatly consolidate previous methods of identifying noteworthy labouring-class poets. If they had not been politicised about established regimes or offering a voyeuristic insight into the lives of labouring-class people, they had nothing to offer. In material terms, the previous critical approaches that dominated before the turn of the twenty-first century, and which are alluded to by Blair, do not differ from Southey’s benevolent, yet patronising attitude in the late eighteenth century where labouring-class poetics are reduced to the status of a curate’s egg.

Despite the opening up of the field of labouring-class poetics to acknowledge female writers, Chartist poets and those with Parnassian aspirations from 2008 onwards, it would take several years before any academic examination of individual labouring-class poets in their own individual contexts would be undertaken. Margaret A. Loose’s 2014 book on Chartism, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Theory and Practice*, again identified the transformative power of Chartist poetry. Loose comments that she has ‘come to see art not simply as expression, reflection, symptom, or the other usual descriptions of its role, but as an agent that effects qualitative, cognitive (perhaps even neurological), and ultimately political change.’<sup>300</sup> This suggests that Loose, like Sanders, sees the power of this type of poetry in the high levels of agency it provided. Loose further refines her perspective to focus on female chartist poets and internationalism, further diversifying the

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>300</sup> Loose, p. 2.

field of labouring-class poetics. Harris's lack of affiliation with either of these groups, despite their inclusivity, has further contributed to his critical neglect.

In 2017, Simon Rennie begins to challenge the ghettoisation that had occurred with both female labouring-class poets and Chartist poetry by producing the *Cotton Famine Poetry database*. As Rennie observes,

This project makes freely available a database of poems written in response to the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861-65, along with commentary, audio recitations and musical performances drawing directly on these poems. These poems were largely sourced from newspapers — local, regional, and national — based in Lancashire, around the UK, and America. Material has also been gathered from Australia and France. [...] The 2020 full launch adds another 300 poems, quadrupling the number of texts, and providing the first extensive literary overview of this significant period in British and international social history.<sup>301</sup>

In terms of evaluating individual poets in their own context, Rennie's project is a distinct evolution from both the inclusive nature of Goodridge's database as well as the previous focus on groups of marginalised poets by Boos, Sanders and Loose. Unlike Goodridge's database, Rennie includes the *work* of individual poets as opposed to purely describing their biographical history. Some of the poems Rennie includes are anonymous but grouping them by theme affords a diversity and inclusivity that, although still political, feels less exclusive than a 'Chartist' label. Rennie also begins to acknowledge a more comprehensive survey of the field of newspapers and periodicals. He refers to newspapers that are 'local, regional, and national – based in Lancashire, around the UK, and America.'

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<sup>301</sup> Rennie, *Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5)*, <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/about/> (para. 1-2 of 3).

This inclusivity is a marked contrast between the, often very narrow, outputs available to Chartist presses. It is interesting to consider that both Harris and Skipsey wrote poems on ‘The Hartley Calamity’, a mining accident that involved the deaths of hundreds of men. It is quite likely that there were other poetic effusions written about this topic but at this point there was a lack of critical attention on miner poets.

In the same year the critical tide towards inclusivity continues to turn. Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge edited *A History of British Working Class Literature* in which Jennie Batchelor observes

The renewed privileging of aesthetics over politics has certainly helped to redress an imbalance in scholarship in the area which, as Donna Landry and William J. Christmas argue, has tended to be “complicit in tying laboring-class writers...so tightly to their social difference from polite culture that their achievements cannot be appreciated artistically, but only sociologically”.<sup>302</sup>

Batchelor is right to acknowledge that by constantly reiterating the differences between labouring-class writers and polite society, the only available critical framework within which to consider them is sociological rather than artistic. This point is important as by divorcing labouring-class writers from middle-class literary culture, they are immediately ghettoised and unable to be viewed from a conventional literary perspective.

This emerging trend is also recognised by Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

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<sup>302</sup> Jennie Batchelor, ‘When “Bread Depends on Her Character”: The Problem of Laboring Class Subjectivity in the Foundling Hospital Archive’, in *A History of British Working Class Literature*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 10-23 (p. 13).

(2018) where although Chartist poetry is the theme of 3 of the 32 contributions in the publication, there are also essays on topics as diverse as ‘Nineteenth-Century Broadside Ballads and the Poetics of Everyday Life’ by Ellen L. O’Brien which explores how the ‘nineteenth-century broadside trade produced a range of imaginative and comical ballads about the routines, labors, intimacies, humiliations, and vagaries of quotidian life’.<sup>303</sup> This less politicised line of enquiry focuses on a huge swathe of previously critically acknowledged writing by labouring-class writers and is supported by essays giving the labouring-class female poets Mary Leapor and Ann Yearsley more extended critical attention. In the case of Mary Leapor, Moyra Haslett explains that her essay ‘draws on [her] experience teaching Mary Leapor in a course for final-year undergraduates titled Eighteenth-Century Women’s Writing [...] Reading Leapor alongside other women writers, such as Anne Finch or Eliza Haywood, encourages students to make connections amongst their works.’<sup>304</sup> Haslett’s inclusive approach allows the more socially elevated Anne Finch to be considered in the same context as Leapor who was from a more modest social background. This seems a very promising move away from ghettoising labouring-class poetics.

Blair, Sanders, Betts and Weiss further expanded the field of labouring-class poetics to include diverse topics and quotidian life in their internet database, *Piston, Pen & Press* which went online in 2018.<sup>305</sup> The stated intention of the website are ‘to understand how industrial workers in Scotland and the North of England, from the 1840s to the 1910s, engaged with literary culture through writing, reading, and participation in wider cultural

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<sup>303</sup> Ellen L. O’Brien, ‘Nineteenth-Century Broadside Ballads and the Poetics of Everyday Life’, in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2018), pp. 43-50 (p. 43).

<sup>304</sup> Moyra Haslett, ‘Rubbing Shoulders with Mary Leapor: Class Curricula as Anthologization’ in *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2018), pp. 75-84 (p. 75).

<sup>305</sup> *Piston, Pen & Press*.

activities.’<sup>306</sup> Furthermore, the authors state that ‘We have chosen miners, railway workers, and textile factory workers as our key industries, but we are investigating beyond these professions too, as we consider how profession, location, and the perception of being part of a specific workforce community influenced workers’ activities as authors, performers and readers.’<sup>307</sup> This website is extremely important to the field of labouring-class poetics as it uses profession as another method of inclusivity. What is even more diverse about the website is that it does not use radical politics as a criterion for inclusion considering poets who may have used their abilities to encourage conformity as Harris did. Indeed, ‘The Reading Project’ section of the database features a short story entitled ‘Matt the Miner’ which is contextualised in a short video by Iona Craig. In this story, the titular character gives his fellow workers a speech about the dangers and issues inherent in unionised action. The story culminates in Matt’s construction of a reading room and advocacy of temperance, which results in a more contented workforce.<sup>308</sup> Much of what Craig discusses is thematically consistent with large swathes of Harris’s corpus and the critical analysis of this kind of writing is an important development that acknowledges the sheer diversity of labouring-class poetics. Furthermore, the website also includes an anthology of mining poets. As the focus of the website is Northern and Scottish writers, this does not include Harris. Unsurprisingly, it does include Skipsey.<sup>309</sup> Another section of the website entitled ‘Mining Matters: Plays and Poems’ also deals with industrial accidents and miners. Again, due to its geographical focus, Harris’s poems about mining are ignored but it is encouraging to see such an extensive and inclusive focus on the poetry of this kind of

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<sup>306</sup> ‘Welcome’, *Piston, Pen & Press*.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> Iona Craig, ‘The Reading Project’, in *Piston, Pen & Press* <<https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/reading-project/>> [accessed 9 December 2023]

<sup>309</sup> ‘Doon in the Dark: Poems from the Mines’, ed. by Kirstie Blair and Lauren Weiss, in *Piston, Pen & Press* <<https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/poetry-anthologies/>> [accessed 9 December 2023]

worker.<sup>310</sup> Boos's previous comment about the lack of geographical focus on Cornwall and increased focus on the North and Scotland in 2008 combines with the Piston, Pen & Press website to further emphasise both the timeliness and necessity of an investigation of Harris's corpus in this current academic climate.

The last five years have seen approaches to labouring-class poetics at their most extensive, acknowledging the means of production used by the vast majority of labouring class poets as well as explicitly challenging dated notions of the metrics by which labouring-class writers should be judged. Kirstie Blair's *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* comments on the prevalence of nineteenth-century labouring-class poets who, like Harris, suddenly disappear from publications and academic discussion. Blair argues that 'there is no meaningful relationship between twenty-first century standards of 'good' poetry (as upheld, for instance, by academics, reviewers, editors of literary magazines), and Victorian popular poetics.'<sup>311</sup> Blair's argument is that Victorian poetry should be judged on its own terms. Like Florence Boos and Bridget Keegan, she is critical of previous academic dismissals of the 'conservatism' of poets like Harris, commenting that:

What better way to prove 'superiority of mental qualities' and the possession of 'higher moral or intellectual' thought and feeling than by writing a poem like Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, or, as the century progressed, Alfred Tennyson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow? Such imitative poetry by working men and women is very deliberate. Publicly demonstrating

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<sup>310</sup> Lauren Weiss, 'Mining Matters: Plays and Poems', in *Piston, Pen & Press* <<https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/mining-matters-play-and-poems/>> [accessed 9 December 2023]

<sup>311</sup> Blair, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community*, p. 2.

working-class mastery of the standards of ‘high’ culture, as they were well aware, could have political as well as cultural benefits.<sup>312</sup>

The current and promising state of academic criticism in labouring-class poetics is typified by Simon Rennie’s 2020 publication *The Poetry of Ernest Jones: Myth, Song, and the ‘Mighty Mind’*.<sup>313</sup> Although the subject of the book is identifiable as a Chartist poet and not labouring-class by birth, Rennie goes beyond the ghettoisation of Chartism to evaluate Jones in his own context, providing hope that other labouring-class chartist poets may receive similar treatment.

At the time of writing this thesis, the most recent academic criticism around labouring-class poetics can be found in the Summer 2023 edition of the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. This edition of the journal contains an extensive number of contributions from the investigators and contributors to the *Piston, Pen & Press* project. Much of this criticism has a quotidian, specific and diverse tone, considering labouring-class communities as places of collaboration, mutual improvement and engagement with industrial technology. Iona Craig considers the politics of miners’ reading rooms in north-east England towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>314</sup> Lauren Weiss conducts an in-depth investigation into how ‘mutual improvement societies were formed primarily on the initiative of individual workers, with some assistance from local religious groups, rather than being employer-led’ showing an increased emphasis on the day-to-day lives of working men.<sup>315</sup> Oliver Betts continues the field’s increasingly inclusive yet expanding aspect by considering the poetry of railway workers. His focus is on exploring these writings ‘as part of an emerging theme

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>313</sup> Rennie, *The Poetry of Ernest Jones: Myth, Song, and the ‘Mighty Mind’*.

<sup>314</sup> Iona Craig, ‘Control and Enlightenment: Nineteenth-Century Miners’ Reading Rooms’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 434-45.

<sup>315</sup> Lauren Weiss, “‘Meeting Together in an Equal and Friendly Manner’: The Workplace Literary Culture of Lancashire Mutual Improvement Societies’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 422–33 (p. 422).

of accident and loss poetry surrounding the railways in Victorian culture but also more specifically as interrelated texts produced by workers sharing common experiences.<sup>316</sup> Mike Sanders takes the opportunity to explore the ‘Pit Brow Lassie’ and argues ‘that pit brow women provided a focus for discussions of the interplay of class and gender roles in Victorian Britain’.<sup>317</sup> Fabienne Moine further considers the ‘active roles played by workers themselves in the formation of popular Victorian literary cultures’ and ‘the function of their working environment [that] has often been overlooked, or (at best) misinterpreted as solely oppressive and sterile.’<sup>318</sup> Kirstie Blair takes *Piston, Pen & Press*’s focus on the quotidian to its logical conclusion, focusing on the relationship between workers and their machines by arguing that ‘the representation of machinery by industrial workers in the Victorian period [has] a qualitatively different literary approach to machinery than that found in the work of established Victorian authors.’<sup>319</sup> So much of this work’s focus on self-development, community, identity and machinery correlates and juxtaposes with the concerns and themes of Harris’s corpus that it makes the re-evaluation of his work in this thesis even more timely. Much of Harris’s life story as he presents it negates some of the more collegiate approaches to self-development by Craig and Weiss with Harris preferring to present his poetic career as one of self-sufficiency and patronage, often implicitly elevating himself above his peers by documenting their reactions to his poetry. Oliver Bett’s research into accident and loss also finds its corollary with Harris’s matter of fact descriptions of the injuries he experienced while mining. Betts too alludes to the Hartley Colliery disaster but as his focus is on railway workers and the North and Scotland, Harris

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<sup>316</sup> Oliver Betts, ‘Immediate Accidents and Lingering Trauma: Railwaymen Poets, Danger, and Emotive Verse’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 410-21 (p. 410).

<sup>317</sup> Michael Sanders, “[D]onning the Garb of a Pit Girl again”: Imagining the ‘Pit Brow Lassie’ in Late-Victorian Fiction’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 446-63 (p. 446).

<sup>318</sup> Fabienne Moine, ‘Working Lives and Beyond: The Workplace and the Formation of Popular Literary Cultures’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 479-84 (p. 479).

<sup>319</sup> Kirstie Blair, ‘Addressing the Machine: Victorian Working-Class Poetry and Industrial Machinery’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28 (2023), 395-409 (p. 395).



is naturally excluded from this dialogue.<sup>320</sup> In particular, Blair's work on the relationship between literary approaches to machinery, where she investigates 'a body of unknown writings that constituted a subgenre within working-class literature of the period: first-person poems in which the worker describes or addresses a machine with which they work on a daily basis', could easily be augmented by a consideration of the context to Harris's poem 'Christian Heroism'. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Harris provides a prose explanation of the context of this poem which places a particular focus on technical mining processes involving fuse lighting and the lifts used in mining.<sup>321</sup> None of these points are criticisms of the important work done by the investigators and contributors to *Piston, Pen & Press*; they are more an indicator that Harris has much to recommend him within the current field and its concerns. It appears that the lacuna identified in Cornish writing by Florence Boos in 2008 has yet to be filled.

### Conclusion

The extensive survey of the scholarship into labouring-class poetics in this chapter confirms some key reasons for Harris's slide into critical obscurity after his death. The reason for Harris's lack of appraisal appears to have remained relatively consistent until recent more inclusive developments in academic scholarship. In the nineteenth century, Southey's first critical engagement sets a tone which remains unaltered throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This is that the lack of erudition commensurate with a labouring-class background perceived by the literary establishment means that poetry written by working men and women can only be accepted as a morally beneficial act for the writer. For this form of poetry to be judged critically, it would necessitate a raising up

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<sup>320</sup> Betts, 'Immediate Accidents and Lingering Trauma: Railwaymen Poets, Danger, and Emotive Verse', p. 412.

<sup>321</sup> Blair, 'Addressing the Machine: Victorian Working-Class Poetry and Industrial Machinery', p. 396.

of labouring-class writers to being judged by the standards of the middle-class literary establishment. The work of Vicinus and Maidment in the latter half of the twentieth century is important when recognising that a large amount of poetry has been produced by poets with labouring-class backgrounds. However, Vicinus's focus on poets with a politicised approach marginalises labouring-class writers by dismissing them as imitative if they use established forms, hence setting up writers whose work is politically themed as more representative of the labouring classes. This approach ghettoises and limits this group of writers and while Brian Maidment attempts to broaden the field to include those writers he terms as 'Parnassian', he is still using their adoption of established literary forms as a further method of alienating them from the established literary taste of the middle classes. He does this by exacerbating their differences first and foremost. The fact that these writers are identified as using forms commensurate with middle-class literary taste is a critical approach that cannot avoid being patronising as it suggests what is established and expected from one person is a mark of distinction for another. To compound this, Maidment's expectation that these writers should transcend the thematic standards of their middle-class peers and offer insights that move beyond their historical context seems inequitable to say the least. It is only with the political act inherent in Goodridge's *Laboring-Class Poets Online* database that the field begins to become inclusive enough to acknowledge Harris's existence. Goodridge initially does this by simply including Harris in his database without affording him any critical treatment. It is only with the emerging academic trend that begins with the investigation of female labouring-class poets and Chartist poets led by Boos and Sanders that the field begins to apply a thematic approach to exploring labouring-class poetics. This is further developed by Simon Rennie's Cotton Famine database and *Piston, Pen & Press's* depoliticisation of the field which allows the quotidian concerns of labouring-class poets to shine, exposing the many areas of the field where Harris has direct critical relevance. However, the geographical lacunae outlined by

Florence Boos in 2008 have remain critically overlooked and it is hoped that this thesis begins to address this issue.

#### Chapter 4: The Cornish landscape and the conventions of Romanticisation

Chapter 3 focused on how both historic and current trends in academic criticism have marginalised those labouring-class poets who adopted formal or thematic approaches commensurate with their literary forbears or peers. It further established that much academic criticism has privileged labouring-class writers who agitate for emancipatory political action. For many academic critics, such as Martha Vicinus, literature that exposes the plight of the labouring classes and calls for change is defined as the true voice of this social group. Labouring-class poets who strove to master established literary forms and styles and influence a wider social demographic have generally been dismissed as imitative.

This chapter focuses on reclaiming John Harris's place in the critical discourse of Victorian poetics. Although its intention is not to keep pace with trends in academic criticism, there has been an increasing focus over the last twenty years on evaluating labouring-class poets *sui generis* as opposed to using success criteria focused on the inclusion of specific themes or formal elements. This chapter evaluates the influence of eighteenth-century literary neo-classical forms and eighteenth-century Romanticism on Harris's corpus. There is also consideration given to how Victorian attitudes towards Romanticism developed throughout the era and how this impacted on Harris's writing.

Bridget Keegan and John Goodridge observe that Harris 'ranks among the most prolific laboring-class poets of the Victorian age, with fifteen published collections of poetry between 1853 and 1884'.<sup>322</sup> For Harris to have been able to publish this prolifically as a labouring-class poet suggests that subjecting his work to an extended critical analysis is worthwhile if only to examine the reasons for the apparent popularity of his writing. Many

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<sup>322</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 226.

Victorian labouring-class poets who have been critically reclaimed have often been praised for their prescience in anticipating the more formally spartan trends of modernism. This divergence from the established, verbose connotations of Victorian poetry has been used by academics to set these writers apart from their more conservative peers and allocate them a place in contemporary critical discourse. This chapter argues that, although not exceptionally prescient, Harris does contain some unique formal elements that set him apart from his peers.

The scope of this chapter is to consider the influence of Romanticism on Harris's corpus alongside the influence of eighteenth-century neo-classical forms of poetry that permeated his work. Consideration is also given to the influence of Romanticism on the Victorians as the nineteenth century progresses and how this may have impacted on Harris's writing. These observations then segue into the changing definitions of Romanticism since the eighteenth century and an investigation as to whether emerging critical trends help to delineate and explore the Romantic aspects of Harris's corpus in the light of contemporary scholarship. The legacy and influence of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century on Harris are then explored alongside how the Victorians' relationship with Romanticism was an additional influence on Harris's corpus. This is made particularly evident when examining Harris's writing in the context of Cornish landscape. After this, the revolutionary aspects of Romanticism on Harris's normally politically conservative poetry are considered. The chapter then moves on to an exploration of Harris's use of the Gothic in his writing alongside the influences the Romantics had on his perception of himself as a poet in the bardic tradition. This chapter concludes with the argument that the Harris's work is an interesting synthesis of influences from eighteenth and nineteenth century iterations of Romanticism.

## John Harris: a 'Romantic' poet?

Simon Bainbridge voices the general opinion of scholars that the Romantic period can be broadly defined as being between 1789 and 1832.<sup>323</sup> The explanation for these dates is that the commencement of the French Revolution and the Great Reform act as natural bookends to the Romantic period. As he acknowledges, these dates are of particular use to critics who wish to characterise the period as one of revolutionary fervour. Bainbridge goes on to suggest that a literary approach to defining the period might yield the dates 1789–1834, with the publication of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and the death of Coleridge encapsulating all that was distinctive about the era.<sup>324</sup> From the perspective of either range of dates, the publication of the first edition of John Harris's debut, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* in 1853 suggests he postdates the era by around twenty years. However, Marilyn Butler observes that not until the 1860s did 'the "Romantics"' become an accepted collective name for Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats, and an agreement begin to emerge about what an English Romantic Poet was like'.<sup>325</sup> This would suggest that Harris would have been around 40 years old when this creation of the Romantic definition took place. At this point, he had already produced three collections of poetry.

In the introduction to *Romanticism: A Sourcebook*, Simon Bainbridge cites René Wellek's definition of the key themes of Romanticism:

the creative powers of the artist and poet; the role of the imagination; the idea of genius; the elevated role of the poet as prophet; the development of the self; the

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<sup>323</sup> Simon Bainbridge, 'Introduction', in *Romanticism: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Simon Bainbridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-19 (p. 6).

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>325</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; repr. 1992), p. 1.

beneficent and shaping role of the natural world; the possibilities of transcendence; an organic understanding of human psychology and the creative process, in opposition to a mechanical one; and limitless aspiration.<sup>326</sup>

This solipsistic nature of Romantic poetry, as well as its opposition to mechanisation and industrialisation, meant that it would seem unlikely to have had much influence on the Victorian era with its focus on the individual as a constituent part of a great era and its celebration of progress and industrialisation. Yet this was not the case and, despite the preoccupations of the Victorian era, the Romantics had a significant influence on Victorian poetics. E. Warwick Slinn explains that,

Victorian poets continued the Romantic rejection of neoclassical decorum (with its hierarchical list of genre from trivial lyric to serious epic); but through the innovations of the dramatic monologue and through an experimental variety of longer forms, they also developed a sense of dynamic heterogeneity which questioned the assumptions of Romantic lyricism, their main and dominating inheritance.<sup>327</sup>

Slinn suggests that the Victorians incorporated the less hierarchical nature of Romanticism's approach to poetics allowing even more diverse forms of poetry to flourish during this era. The impact of this implicit questioning of forms such as Romantic lyricism is evident in Harris's corpus. Harris combines intense and meditative feelings about nature that bear the influence of eighteenth-century Romanticism with proselytising writing on God and moral behaviour which is typical of the Victorian era. As Andrew Radford and

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<sup>326</sup> Bainbridge, pp. 4-5.

<sup>327</sup> E. Warwick Slinn, 'Poetry', in *A Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture*, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 307-322 (p. 309).

Mark Sandy observe, the influence of Romanticism on the Victorians was not without its anxieties. They comment on the

desire of Victorian writers to possess, master and discipline the *zeitgeist* of Romanticism, so that what they conceived of as Romantic bears the stamp of a supposedly more civilized and rational Victorian age. Yet all the time there is a neurotic fear that the potentially subversive, ungovernable essence of Romanticism will begin to work independently and possess the Victorian possessor.<sup>328</sup>

These comments go some way to explaining the duality in Harris's work, where the sublime is often broken in on by passages of intensive proselytising. This displays the tensions evident in Victorian literary work when acknowledging their Romantic influences.

Also, unlike the Romantics, Harris was influenced by the themes and concerns of poets from the eighteenth-century that formed much of his reading. D.M. Thomas observes that Harris's

unique 'inner landscape' seems to me the reconciliation of the social and lyrical impulse, the Augustan and the Romantic. This is partly attributable to his self-education : the world of the Sunday School with its 18th century hymns, and the copies of Burns and Longfellow that he managed to borrow from his middle-class mentors.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy, 'Introduction: Romanticism and the Victorians', in *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era*, ed. by Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy (London: Routledge, 2008; repr. 2018), pp. 1-14 (p. 3).

<sup>329</sup> *The Granite Kingdom Poems of Cornwall*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. 13.



Here, Thomas begins to explore the issue of categorisation when placing John Harris into context as a poet. He seems to have absorbed the formal rigour of neo-classicism and then combined it with Romantic aspects – especially in his description of the natural world. As Thomas observes, Harris’s loco-descriptive poem, *A Story of Carn Brea*, provides several examples of this hybridisation:

Some court “great gluts of people,” houses, towns,  
And cities drunk with riot ; but, for me,  
I woo the reedy meadow and the fen.  
Where rushes rustle, or the rock where climbs  
The shining ivy, and the wild bird sings.  
Quaint do ye call me, that I love such scenes,  
For evermore with Nature ? Be it so ;  
I am her child, and she my mother is ;  
And so you must not blame me.<sup>330</sup>

Harris corresponds with God via his personification of both the manmade and the natural world. Cities are referred to as ‘drunk with riot’, suggesting that the developing urban sprawl that followed the Industrial Revolution had not resulted in a positive or orderly environment. This is a view entirely in line with the negativity the Romantics expressed about urbanisation and the industrial revolution. The use of the word ‘glut’ shows that Harris views densely populated areas with distaste. Harris’s hybridisation of the loco-descriptive form with lyrical descriptions of the natural world influenced by Romanticism shows that his work defies easy formal classification as derivative or formally conservative.

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<sup>330</sup> John Harris, *Story of Carn Brea, Essays, and Poems* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1863), p. 20.

Harris's praise for the specific geographical region of Carn Brea hill near Camborne embodies a close adherence to the formal approaches of the era that preceded him. It is worth noting that the loco-descriptive poem reached its peak of popularity in the eighteenth-century, with the most famous example of its recurrence in the nineteenth century being found in Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy*. This poem details the experiences of a scholar who leaves his studies to live with Gipsies and learn about their lives and ways. The setting of the poem is primarily pastoral.<sup>331</sup> This is much like *A Story of Carn Brea* where two horsemen converse with an old widow and various religious and moral precepts are illustrated via tales of the lives of labouring men like miners and fishermen. It is worth considering that labouring-class writers' use of established literary forms such as those examined above has been used by scholars like Vicinus in *The Industrial Muse* in the 1970s and Maidment in *The Poorhouse Fugitives* in the 1990s to dismiss vast swathes of their work. Vicinus thought that the labouring-class poetics that conformed to established literary models were a betrayal of the voice of the labouring classes and Maidment felt that a labouring-class writer who iterated conventional forms needed to transcend historical discourse in order to be noteworthy. A closer investigation of the idiosyncratic and hybridised nature of the work of labouring-class poets who do use these conventional forms by scholars such as Bridget Keegan would suggest that their work is highly original and in fact hybridises form. My intention is not to suggest that Harris is a Romantic poet; however, it is clear that his poetry bears the strong influence of Romanticism in line with the influence this literary movement had on the Victorians.

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<sup>331</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold 1840-1847* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 230-37.

## Changing critical views of Romanticism

As we have seen, Warwick Slinn confirmed that the Victorians were influenced by Romanticism inasmuch as they continued to uphold its rejection of neo-classical traditions. As the subsequent literary movement after neo-classicism, the Romantics were perceived to be a negation of Augustan poetics which meant that they were both formally and thematically distinct from the literary styles and concerns that had preceded them. René Wellek confirms that the Romantic poets were out of step with the expectations of their own age:

The great poets of the English romantic movement constitute a fairly coherent group, with the same view of poetry and the same conception of imagination, the same view of nature and mind. They share also a poetic style, a use of imagery, symbolism, and myth, which is quite distinct from anything that had been practiced by the eighteenth century, and which was felt by their contemporaries to be obscure and almost unintelligible.<sup>332</sup>

The notion that a literary movement is a direct negation of the one that preceded it appears to be a recurring theme in academic criticism in other areas. Martha Vicinus, for example, has expressed a wish to reconsider the notions of labouring-class poetics from the position of writing that was expressly written by labouring-class men to facilitate action from their peers. Vicinus's attitude is that, as this kind of writing was written to evade bourgeois economic and social control, it is truly representative of labouring-class poetics.<sup>333</sup> This kind of thinking is attractive as it enables academics to classify literary movements *per se*

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<sup>332</sup> René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. by Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 178.

<sup>333</sup> Vicinus, pp. 1-2.

and facilitates specialisms. Academic enquiries into labouring-class poetics and Romanticism reveal that considering certain literary movements as a direct rebuttal of what preceded them is often inaccurate. In the case of Romanticism, Léon Rosenthal argues against Wellek explaining that the Romantics bore some strong influences from the eighteenth century, especially from an aesthetic perspective.<sup>334</sup> Despite the lingering eighteenth-century influence attributed by Rosenthal, Romanticism was still a denial of many of its elements including, as he indicates above, a partial rejection of its formal conventions. It is also worth considering that any literary movement that rejects some of the values or aesthetics of the preceding one is defined by this rejection to a certain extent. The Romantics may have eliminated classical traditions, but they were influenced by antiquity and classical notions of perfection in their writing. When viewed in the context of the debates around labouring-class poetics a degree of contradiction appears to emerge. From Rosenthal's academic perspective, it is acceptable for the Romantics to display influences from previously established literary taste. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, any evidence of established literary forms on a labouring-class poet's writing has been seen as imitative of bourgeois sensibilities. This has led to the dismissal of this kind of work. by critics such as Martha Vicinus and, more implicitly, Brian Maidment.

The criteria for defining Romanticism established by Wellek remain consistent with our general understanding of its conventions today. However, the late 1970s and 1980s saw a shift to a more inclusive approach to the classification and inclusion of Romantic authors. Bainbridge clarifies that the word Romantic came under pressure to expand its very limited focus on a small number of writers who were nearly all male. This critique of the dominant model of Romanticism led to the 1970s witnessing

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<sup>334</sup> Léon Rosenthal, *Romanticism*, trans. by Bérengère Mauduit (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2008), p. 8.

the beginning of a recovery of a remarkable number of writers who, it appeared, had been almost entirely forgotten, many of whom were women, together with an increased focus on a range of forms beyond poetry, including the novel, non-fictional prose, and more recently, drama. In the context of these developments, a number of critics have argued that it is pointless to use the word ‘Romanticism’ to designate what was always a shifting and contested construct, preferring to use the word ‘Romantic’ to indicate a particular period.<sup>335</sup>

The academic shift between using the term ‘Romanticism’ to define a relatively fluid construct to using ‘Romantic’ to indicate an era where there may be a wider range of commonalities is similar to the changes in scholarship on labouring-class poetics in the 1980s. This is something identified by Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas in the previous chapter. It would appear that the 1980s were a period where certain marginalised voices were beginning to be investigated in much more thorough detail. The contemporary impact of this more inclusive approach to studies of Romanticism over the last 30 years is evident in the 2009 edition of *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature* where James Chandler suggests that he has not included a section for woman writers ‘on the twofold grounds that they should not be ghettoized and that they would be fully integrated into the volume as a whole’.<sup>336</sup> Chandler’s comments about ghettoization do point to issues of over specificity when focusing on specific groups of writers. This can lead to them being compared to each other as opposed to being part of a larger literary movement informed by social, economic and political circumstances. Having said this, attempts to define various relatively abstract literary terms to writers who were sometimes generations apart such as William Blake and Percy Shelley is challenging in and of itself

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<sup>335</sup> Bainbridge, p .5.

<sup>336</sup> James Chandler, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. by James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1-17 (p. 15).

due to their different backgrounds and the evolving historical events which influenced their writing. Aiden Day further confirms this viewpoint:

The problem is that any such attempts to summarize Romanticism inevitably end up over-systematising and simplifying the phenomenon. They imply a coherence (Wellek indeed speaks explicitly of coherence) which closer inspection leads us to call in question. It is true that some of the elements by which Romanticism is defined in the summaries do appear in the writings of those who are now called Romantic. But it is not true that all British Romantic writers display all of those elements all of the time.<sup>337</sup>

Harris is a poet identifiable as having Romantic aspects or an influence on his corpus as opposed to being a clearly definable 'Romantic' poet. Evidence of this can be found in his poem 'Spring':

Go out into the fields ;  
Go out among the flowers :  
Once more, in Nature's budding-time,  
This privilege is ours !  
The lark soars up ! up ! up !  
The white-wing'd clouds among :  
Go out into the meadows, go  
And listen to his song.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Aiden Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>338</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, p. 83.

Harris's love of the natural world is quintessentially Romantic here. He celebrates the organic environment with zeal. This is reinforced by his listing of all the conventionally attractive aspects of spring such as flowers and birds. In some ways, this writing is typical of Wellek's comment that 'the beneficent and shaping role of the natural world; the possibilities of transcendence' typify Romanticism. However, from another perspective, there is a complete lack of introspection in this poem. This is also something alluded to by Wellek when he comments on 'the organic understanding of human psychology' evident in Romantic writing.<sup>339</sup> This level of reflection does typify many Romantic poems such as Wordsworth's section of 'The Prelude' where he narrates the story of his experience of the rowing boat and the mountain and comes to some less joyful conclusions about the natural world than Harris does.<sup>340</sup> However, this lack of introspection may also be attributable to the fact that some of Harris's poems were also published in local newspapers for which there was a large and defined market. There were also potential benefits for labouring-class poets. As Andrew Hobbs observes,

Throughout the Victorian era, local newspapers were widely read publications, reaching a broader readership than London newspapers, magazines, and reviews, let alone part-works or books. Most issues of local newspapers regularly published one or two short poems, which were often located in sections specifically dedicated to poetry.<sup>341</sup>

Harris's poem 'Spring' was not published in a newspaper. It is interesting to note that poems of this sort were often very similar in their literary stylings, presumably to achieve publication as well as evidencing the influence labouring-class poets had on one another. An

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<sup>339</sup> Bainbridge, pp. 4-5.

<sup>340</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Works of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), pp. 637-38.

<sup>341</sup> Hobbs, p. 488.

example of this is the poem 'Spring' in the *Forget-Me-Not* literary annual published between 1822-1847. Volume 1846 contains a poem also entitled 'Spring'. The extract below has much in common with Harris's literary stylings. The poet is partially anonymous and only identified as S.H.S.

'Neath leafy beech or pine,  
Listening, I hear the voice of birds again,  
Wandering, where fragrant shine  
Fresh budding trees in April's passing rain :  
And Nature everywhere lifts up her voice,  
Bidding us all rejoice.<sup>342</sup>

Both poems personify the natural world, encouraging the reader to rejoice and both reference bird song. In Harris's case the bird is identified as being the lark but in S.H.S.'s poem the avian voice is more generalised. Although a Romantic influence can be ascribed to Harris it is clearly also prevalent in the writing within other literary periodicals of the era. Harris's poem repeats the imperative verb 'go' three times in the stanza previously cited as well as commanding the reader to 'listen'. S.H.S. makes use of the similarly direct 'bidding us all rejoice' suggesting that both poems have a similarly didactic desire to influence their readership. As Robin Gilmour observes, the successful middle-class industrialists and businessmen of the Victorian era meant that only outward looking perspectives were associated with success. Interiority and self-reflection were the preserve of the backward looking and regressive who did not celebrate the era's industrial achievements which had allowed a small minority to make such extraordinary profit under the banner of 'progress'.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> S.H.S., 'Spring', *Forget-Me-Not* (1846), pp. 77-78.

<sup>343</sup> Gilmour, p. 27.



The critical move towards a more inclusive definition of Romantic writers is particularly useful when considering Harris as it affords a close examination of his writing to actuate his place in the canon of Victorian poets. As it preceded the Victorian era, Romanticism was an obvious influence on many Victorian poets such as Tennyson. In his autobiography, Harris recounts the excitement of hearing Byron for the first time.

In the lovely home of the Misses Thomas I first heard Mr. Bull read some choice extracts from Byron's "Childe Harolde." The masterly might of this powerful magician held me entranced. For weeks and months I could hear or think of nothing else. To borrow the book and read it for myself, what a treat ! but nobody would think of lending it to me.<sup>344</sup>

Mr Bull was a local member of the clergy in the Camborne area. Byron had a marked emotional impact on Harris and, as has been discussed Chapter 2, Byron's appropriation of the Spenserian stanza had a direct influence on Harris's prosody. Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy offer an excellent observation of Byron's potential influence in the nineteenth century:

The self-willed Byronic hero and the self-made industrialist were both indebted to the revolutionary spirit that liberated the individual from the hidebound, humourless dictates of a past that obstructed their earnest attempts at self-realisation.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 63.

<sup>345</sup> Radford and Sandy, p. 5.

Although Harris was not a ‘self-made industrialist’ he was a ‘self-made man’ and the individualism that Byron promoted must have been a huge spur to Harris’s ‘earnest attempts at self-realisation’ as a poet.

D.M. Thomas is correct when he observes that Harris sees God in the natural world.<sup>346</sup> Harris’s casting of himself as a ‘child’ of nature in ‘The Story of Carn Brea’ can only be read with the implication that the natural world is made by God. In the following section of the poem, Harris uses his narrator to offer a rhapsodic description of the natural environment of Carn Brea near Camborne. Here, the narrator of the poem reflects on nature in a tone reminiscent of the sublime:

How blissful thus to muse where Nature pours  
Her incense forth in hollows watch'd with hills,  
And roof'd with stars, and floor'd with living flowers !  
O what a temple is the leafy wood,<sup>347</sup>

The framing of the leafy wood as a temple through which ‘nature pours her incense’ reinforces the way Harris perceives the natural world as a product of God’s work. In this poem, the natural world is the site of a place of worship — a metaphorical church or temple. The trunks of the ‘leafy wood’ might constitute the pillars of the church; the ceremonial use of incense could be reflected in the smell of the wood’s flora and God’s limitless ability to create is potentially symbolised by the church being ‘roof’d with stars’. For Harris, religious worship can be conducted within the natural world because God made everything. To praise nature using the conventions of organised religion is to praise God’s work.

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<sup>346</sup> *The Granite Kingdom Poems of Cornwall*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. 13.

<sup>347</sup> Harris, *A Story of Carn Brea, Essays, and Poems*, p. 23.

The idea of nature as the embodiment of God is also a notable convention of Romanticism.

Aiden Day observes,

Nature thus can offer a 'resemblance' of the 'glorious faculty' of higher minds.

Nature can herself intimate something beyond herself: the soul, the imagination of the whole. [...] What is really of importance in this passage is the male speaker's mind, his imagination, which participates in and apprehends the ultimate mind.<sup>348</sup>

Day's observations about Romantic notions of the natural world and its relationship to God fit perfectly with Harris's. Its key function for Harris's imagination is that it brings him closer to God. For Harris, to praise nature is to praise God and acknowledge the higher mind that created it.

Harris's Romantic influences were not unusual in the mid-nineteenth century as the movement had a pervasive influence on Victorian poetics. In terms of Harris's influences, Kirstie Blair has been cited in Chapter 2 of this thesis commenting on the relationship between labouring-class poets and the newspaper presses and how they were critical to achieving patronage. Moreover, they also served as a key way for labouring-class poets to influence and interact with each other. As Andrew Hobbs comments:

What has struck me the most is evidence that poetry was not seen as an exclusively literary genre; it was also a journalistic genre used widely to comment on the news [...] In fact, judging by the quality of some of the poems accepted and the editorial comments about the submissions that were rejected, poetry seems to have been viewed as a method of communication or way of thinking that was open even to

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<sup>348</sup> Day, p. 189.

those with little or no poetic ability. It was imagined as just another style of talking or writing.<sup>349</sup>

That poetry could also serve as a journalistic genre and that newspaper culture would have been an influence on Harris's corpus is suggested by my previous comments in Chapter 2 on Harris's poem 'To the First Violet', whose stock themes and conventionality were criticised by George Smith, as well as the typicality of his 'Spring' poem alluded to earlier in this chapter. Despite his work ethic and intense desire for self-improvement Harris was working with a paucity of formal or thematic influences. D.M. Thomas confirms that Harris was writing in very straitened circumstances without wide-ranging influence:

John Clare, with whom Harris is in many ways comparable, was luckier in that the nature of his gift threw in isolation. But Harris was really a sophisticated poet, who needed to absorb other poetry into his own. We have seen how he transmuted the Augustans and Wordsworth.<sup>350</sup>

The fundamental difference between Harris and some of his more lauded peers such as Joseph Skipsey is that Harris's idiosyncrasy has gained him very little critical attention whereas some of his contemporaries have been singled out for praise for writing with a similar lack of awareness of contemporary literary trends. Harris 'transmuted the Augustans and Wordsworth'; Skipsey used an unadorned style of poetry influenced by trade union activism to advocate for social change. Both are idiosyncratic, but Skipsey is noted by critics and Harris is dismissed. The attempts by some Victorian critics to make the Romantics newly relevant also allows the argument that, from a certain perspective,

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<sup>349</sup> Hobbs, pp. 490-91.

<sup>350</sup> *Songs from the Earth*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. xi.

Harris was also prescient of literary trends or at least more in line with some of his contemporaries that he might appear at a cursory glance.

Indeed, Harris used Romantic authors to provide inscriptions for many of his longer poems, arguably as a way of reframing them for a nineteenth-century audience. In a biographical sketch entitled 'Items Not Found in 'Peeps at a Poet'' (1866), Harris offers some further biographical detail about his boyhood commenting on his formative love of reading Robert Burns and Robert Bloomfield. He also reminisces about his time spent down a mine as a younger man and some of his formative writing experiences. At both the opening and close of this biographical fragment, Harris cites two lines from Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood': 'The thought of our past years in me doth breed | Perpetual benediction.'<sup>351</sup> Harris concludes his biographical sketch with a further line from Wordsworth which is 'So be it when I shall grow old, | Or let me die !'<sup>352</sup> Harris's appropriation of Wordsworth's lines are clearly designed to show something of the continuing relevance of his work. The biographical extract that follows Harris's Wordsworth quotation reinforces that Harris is trying to appropriate him to convey an impression:

Often during my boyhood my father would send me into the fields to dig what he called "the ditch." This was a portion of the green sward, about two feet from the hedge, all around the meadow, which I dug up with a long flat hoe. And here I learned to write poetry and sing some of my early songs. I used to put my scrap of pencilled paper upon the grass, a few feet in advance of the broken ground, and then hoe away, making my verse at the same time ; and, when I came up to the paper, write it down, while the lark sang overhead, and the hum of myriad insects

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<sup>351</sup> Wordsworth, p. 589.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

filled the mountain air. Go where I might, my paper scrap and pencil were always at hand, and the world was to me a vast theatre of song.<sup>353</sup>

This biographical fragment is perfectly attuned to the sentimental attitude of the Victorians towards childhood. Using the Wordsworth quotation from ‘The thought of our past years in me doth breed | Perpetual benediction’ enables Harris to appropriate a mood that invokes the magic and blessing of his childhood experiences.<sup>354</sup> He has used the themes of Wordsworth’s ode to achieve a sense of a childhood full of sensory pleasure in the power of nature. The ‘hum of myriad insects’ gives the scene a sense of plenitude reflective of Harris’s feelings of inspiration in the natural world.

Despite Harris writing in prose and Wordsworth’s writing being a poem, the ideas are similar. ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ was inspired by Wordsworth’s increasing inability to divine an immortal presence in nature. By touching on something as eternal as the experience of childhood, Harris was making use of the Romantics in a truly Victorian sense. This is because Harris has co-opted the lines but not the overall sentiment of the poem. Unlike Wordsworth, Harris never lost his appreciation of the natural world as reflection of the divine.

Harris’s citation of Wordsworth dovetails with the Victorians’ use of the Romantics to illustrate sentiments that were germane to their own perceptions of themselves and the era. Specifically, he achieves the impact of highlighting a mood of lost childhood here by his use of the Wordsworth quotation and then uses his own prose to explore the nuances of this mood. One might suggest that Wordsworth is the introduction and Harris’s prose is the exposition. However, Harris’s relationship with Romanticism is not as simple as re-

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<sup>353</sup> Harris, *Shaksperes’s Shrine, An Indian Story. Essays, and Poems*, p. 4.

<sup>354</sup> Wordsworth, p. 589.

appropriating the sections of it that appealed to some Victorian notions of universality. It was a direct influence on his work as the next section identifies.

### Victorian progressiveness and Romanticism

The previous citation from Harris's autobiography about his experiences digging a ditch and composing poetry shows that the Romantic idea of making every day experiences the stuff of art was a substantial influence on his poetic themes. Fiona Stafford clarifies the extent to which even the most mundane themes could be a source of poetic inspiration:

As M.H. Abrams argued in a wide-ranging analysis that dominated many critical readings during the second half of the twentieth century, the Romantic mind was more like a lamp than a mirror, shedding its own light on the outside world, rather than being merely reflective. In the Romantic period, the most everyday experience could therefore prove to be the stuff of art: Anna Barbauld was even able to transform the 'dreaded Washing-Day' into poetry.<sup>355</sup>

Harris was a miner until the age of 37. He did not have access to a wide palate of experiences and thus it is unsurprising that much of his poetry is inspired by everyday life. This was a method employed by the Romantics and is an idea consciously adopted by Wordsworth who observes in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* in 1802:

The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men;

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<sup>355</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 7.

and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.<sup>356</sup>

Despite the collegiate tone of this introduction where Wordsworth alludes to ‘common life’ and the ‘language really used by men’, it is important to acknowledge the class divide that affected both men’s means of production. Wordsworth’s language choices imply an objective distance. ‘Men’ are referred to with no use of an inclusive personal pronoun such as ‘us’. The explicit reference to ‘common life’ suggests it was not Wordsworth’s life or he would not have mentioned it specifically. This kind of middle-class interiority where literature is a tool for observation and reflection is commented on by Thomas Pfau who points out that ‘Romanticism’s invention of “literature” [was] the medium best suited for professionalizing and governing a largely uncolonized middle-class interiority.’<sup>357</sup> Pfau is making the point that the very conception of Romantic literature was focused on notions of leisure and observation which allow interiority to develop. A miner like Harris did not have the luxury of reflection when trying to avoid death or injury.

The further issue with this form of observational approach identified by Pfau is that it did not always breed deep empathy:

Arguably, Keats had a point when he remarked that Wordsworth, steeped in material security and an affluence of spirit, should “have thought a little deeper” before writing “Gypsies,” in which case most likely he “would not have written the poem at all”.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Wordsworth & Coleridge Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 290.

<sup>357</sup> Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Cultural Product* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.



Pfau's citation of Keats suggests that a process of observation did not lead to a particularly empathic rendering by Wordsworth of lives markedly different than his own. However, this does presume that this level of engagement with his subjects was Wordsworth's intention in the first instance. He may have been well using various social demographics of people and incidents of common life as tools to develop his 'interiority'. By contrast, as a labouring man, Harris only had a very limited number of hours in which to experience and observe life beyond his work as a miner. This necessitated poetry about the natural world and the reflections that he made upon it, more than formulating a literary philosophy. This can be seen in his poem, 'The Fall of the Old House', where he ruminates on the destruction of a dwelling by a storm. As the poem progresses, it becomes apparent that this is Harris's old home. This was referred to locally as 'Six Chimneys', a dwelling he describes in his autobiography. After explaining the damage wreaked upon the house by the storm and reminiscing about his time spent at the house, Harris offers a few philosophical observations borne of the experience:

There is a rent in Nature now,—a gash where all was fair, —  
A chasm which old Time himself will never more repair, —  
A breaking up of that which was so beautiful and bright, —  
A severing of the soul from earth,—a gathering in of night.<sup>359</sup>

Harris's use of the house's destruction to reflect on the passing of time has an almost metaphysical quality. It certainly subscribes to Wordsworth's maxim of using the ordinary to consider the extraordinary. What is particularly interesting is Harris's juxtaposition of the manmade world with the natural world. The house is obviously a manmade construct, yet Harris sees its destruction as rendering the natural world.

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<sup>359</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor and the Mountain*, p. 125.

Harris's Romantic attempts to negate what would have in many instances been a very mixed landscape of organic land and industrial waste in Cornwall are typical of much writing during the Romantic era where man's impact on the natural landscape is dismissed. Shelley Trower comments that,

a new kind of aesthetics of the picturesque emerged in the Romantic period, an aesthetics that tended to exclude signs of economic activity from the landscape, but that nevertheless at times accepted limited traces of industry. One of the best-known writers on picturesque travel was of course William Gilpin [whose] brief account of the Cornish tin mines on his Western tour which typify "the limits of normal Picturesque concern with the conditions of economic production". Gilpin's visit to Cornwall is cut short because he finds the landscapes "coarse" and "uninteresting" despite recognising the geological qualities of the area. He notes that there is much of interest for the antiquarian and fossilist including stone monuments, metals, and fossils, and that despite the "wildness" of the "dreary landscape" these lands are "the richest in the country."<sup>360</sup>

Trower's citing of Gilpin's visit to Cornwall suggests that areas shorn of natural and organic beauty were commonplace. Harris's acknowledgment of the damage caused by the destruction of his house is quite distinct. For Harris, it seems that its removal has caused further damage to the organic landscape despite it being a manmade construction. In spite of this, presumably the house would have been rebuilt or its remaining materials redeployed to build another property. In any event, both of these actions are further evidence of man's impact on the natural landscape which is something held in contempt by

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<sup>360</sup> Shelley Trower, 'Primitive Rocks: Humphry Davy, Mining and the Sublime Landscapes of Cornwall', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 7 (2014), 20-40 (p. 32).

Romantic literature. Again, Harris aligns himself with the mores of Romantic literature in opposition to many of the Victorian ideals of development and progress.

John Harris placed an especial emphasis on the sublime in the natural world in his writing. The legacy of Romanticism on their poetry was complex for the Victorians. Their notions of the natural world were scientific, symbolic, and much less positive, John Parham explains,

Victorian modernity, in the shape of new scientific paradigms and fundamental social changes, threw into confusion the greater certainties of Romanticism.

Victorian literature became characterized, in the first place, by what Wendell Stacy Johnson has described as a “deep feeling of ambivalence about the sea, the sky, the seasonal trees, flowers, and fruits [...] about the whole Romantic landscape.”<sup>361</sup>

Parham points to Johnson identifying an emerging dichotomy. New scientific understanding and modes of conscientious, accurate description was being counteracted by increasingly symbolic representations of nature. What has been previously largely positive associations attached to a Wordsworthian sense of human meaning in the landscape became replaced with ambivalent or negative ones.<sup>362</sup>

Parham reflects the Victorian appropriation of Romantic ideologies. Landscape was sublime to Wordsworth and offered him a way of working out his ‘interiority’ via the natural world. However, the Victorian era’s increasing focus on ‘progression’ resulted in increasing urbanisation and industrialisation and the natural, organic landscape became less familiar to the average person. This was compounded by further scientific descriptions

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<sup>361</sup> John Parham, *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 72.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

of nature which ended up reconfiguring its symbolic meaning to the public where it moved from a creation of God to creation of Science. Even if God created Science, the countryside was one step removed. The natural landscape was now more alienating than comforting for the average settler in a less rural environment. This resulted in a more ambivalent view of the natural world as a site of threat as opposed to enlightenment. With the advent of Darwin's theories of evolution in the mid nineteenth century, God's exact role in the creation of organic life was also less certain. This also made it more challenging to view this environment in such rhapsodic terms.

The deep feeling of ambivalence about the natural landscape and the sea specifically, as identified by Johnson, did not correlate with Harris's impressions of the former. Harris first saw the sea when he visited Lands' End after he married. He describes the event in his autobiography:

So away we went in the matin breezes, down, down past Johnson's Head, away on the extreme crags of the Land's End ; and O, what a wilderness of wonders was there ! We felt doubly paid for the mist, doubly paid for our long walk, as the huge clouds rolled back from the rising sun, and the great sea became bluer and bluer, and the Scilly Islands rose up to view, and the noisy gulls called to each other in the crevices of the cliff, or cried upon the waters like poets of the billows. I stood upon one of the crags and repeated Charles Wesley's hymn, and felt I had begun a new era in my existence. The Land's End is like a great craggy poem, epic or otherwise. Every poet should read it, and make it his own.<sup>363</sup>

This is an extract from a letter from Harris to a friend describing his experiences of Land's End. As has been clarified in the previous section of this chapter, some of Harris's approach to Romanticism was similar to the Victorian appropriation of it to reinforce its

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<sup>363</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 77.

own ideologies. However, he expresses a view of the natural world which is entirely commensurate with the Romantic perception of the landscape. Harris's use of language is rhapsodic and betrays no trace of ambivalence about the natural world. Religious language makes an appearance early on in this extract with the phrase 'matin breezes', which is a reference to morning prayer service in the Anglican church. Presumably, the breeze is the voice of God. This metaphor is partially extended by Harris's description of the gulls crying 'like poets of the billows' suggesting that even the animals are in praise of the beauty of the creator of themselves and this beautiful scene. The close shows Harris's perception that the site of Land's End itself should be a perpetually renewing source of inspiration for all poets. Further evidence of Harris's perception of Land's End in Romantic terms can be found in the poem 'The Land's End':

I walk'd the storm-swept, heather-hung Land's End,  
And mused within its sea-wash'd galleries,  
Whose granite arches mock the rage of Time.  
I revell'd in the mystery of its shades,  
And my soul soar'd upon the wings of song.  
I treasured up the lore the sea-gulls taught,  
Which in white clouds were cooing to the breeze.  
I quaff'd the music of this granite grove,  
And read rude cantos in the book of crags,  
Stretching me in the theatre of heath,  
When morn was breaking, and the light-house seem'd  
An angel in the waters, and the rocks  
Rang to the music of a thousand throats.  
I look'd upon it as an awful poem,  
Writ with the fingers of the Deity,

Whilst the proud billows of the mighty deep  
Roll'd on their crests the awful name of GOD.<sup>364</sup>

This representation of Land's End is archetypally Romantic in every sense. Harris communes with the natural world as a cipher for conversing with the higher mind of the divine. Nature is celebrated in all its beauty and passion but often using a liturgical semantic field: seagulls teach Harris 'lore'; he sees a lighthouse as an 'angel'; the whole scene is an 'awful poem writ with the fingers of the Deity'. Harris uses the term 'awful' in the Romantic sense which refers to the awe inspiring as opposed to the terrible. Concluding that the eternally rolling sea bears the name of 'GOD', this poem is archetypally Romantic in its stylings with none of the ambivalence that characterises emerging depictions of landscape in Harris's contemporaries.

The Victorians' attitude towards the Romantics was complicated. The Romantics (especially the first generation) had begun writing in an era of political unrest in France which supported their rebellion against the forms and values of eighteenth-century neo-classicism. The Victorians viewed themselves as an inclusive and progressive nation state. In his chapter of his book *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* entitled, 'The Anti-Romantics', Jerome Hamilton Buckley clarifies that,

A new generation which would reach maturity in the early years of Victoria's reign might still derive much from romantic technique and subject matter, but it could no longer imitate the practices of artists who had developed their individual talents in a different intellectual milieu. If the early Victorians were to realize their own vitality, they had to strike out in new directions; they had to discover their own styles, forms, and critical standards. [...] The Victorian era rapidly recognized its

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<sup>364</sup> Harris, *The Land's End, Kynance Cove, and other Poems*, p. 4.

proper spokesmen in writers who were strenuously conscious of Victorian problems; and the reputations of the romantics suffered accordingly a far-reaching shift in taste.<sup>365</sup>

This suggests that the Victorian era's perpetual state of improvement and modernisation made Romanticism's individuality of self-expression for its own sake deeply unappealing. In a period where individuals were celebrated as the product of a great epoch, a literary movement that was against the status quo and was in active favour of the French Revolution was bound to generate a degree of tension. The Victorian nation state was predicated on the individual's material contribution to a great society and nation. This was not conducive to iconoclastic acts in poetry. Further to this, Darwin's thinking had begun to challenge previous notions that the natural world was God's explicit work. This distancing of the natural world from God was also compounded by increased urbanisation and industrialisation which also emphasised man's agency over his natural environment. The building of towns, cities, and factories presupposed a dominance and a superiority over the natural world which left Romanticism's values and ideals seeming completely outdated. This meant that Victorian poets who depicted the natural world represented it much more symbolically and with a greater degree of complexity than their Romantic predecessors. The next section of this chapter investigates the political values and aspirations of the Romantics which also had an extensive influence on Harris's work.

#### Elevation and emancipation: the influence of Romantic politics on John Harris

As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, Harris was politically conservative. Many of the possible reasons for this conformist position have been explored in Chapter 2

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<sup>365</sup> Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951; repr. 1981), pp. 16-17.

However, this did not mean that he did not advocate for social change in line with his religious values. Harris's collection *Cruise of the Cutter* (1872) was a series of poems intended to promote peace. Titles of poems in this collection include 'We Will Ever be Kind to All' and 'The Reign of Endless Peace is Near'.<sup>366</sup> In 1878, he produced another politically influenced collection entitled *The Two Giants* (1878). This was a polemic on Harris's two biggest concerns: alcoholism and war. This collection is split into two big sections of just under thirty poems each entitled 'Giant Drink' and 'Giant War'. These are then followed by miscellaneous poems on a range of topics. The 'Giant Drink' and 'Giant War' poems are usually based around a character with a Dickensian sounding name and their requisite misfortunes with either topic. Sometimes the protagonist of the poem is the victim of drink and war and sometimes they are the person who perpetrates this behaviour. Each poem concludes with a dogmatic lesson.

In the preface to his polemic on alcoholism and war, entitled 'Two Giants', Harris states his intentions boldly. These show a degree of ambition for a labouring-class poet which was not entirely typical:

It will be obvious to the reader that the two huge overgrown monsters herein personified, and giving the book its title, are none other than GIANT DRINK and GIANT WAR, whose terrible deeds so desolate the earth. They both destroy their thousands and their tens of thousands of all ages : and the writer trusts that these simple lyrics, which are chiefly scenes of rural life, and pictures from the toiling peasantry of the realm, may be welcomed by his philanthropic countrymen, and serve, in some small measure, to accelerate the overthrow of INTEMPERANCE and the SWORD. Has not song sometimes accomplished what sterner philosophy

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<sup>366</sup> Harris, *The Cruise of the Cutter and other Peace Poems*, p. vii.



could not achieve ? So he has been irresistibly drawn to attempt to wound these strong destroyers of mankind with the wild-wood warblings of his muse.<sup>367</sup>

Viewed in the context of previous prefaces in Harris's corpus, this one strikes a strident note. In the prefaces that had preceded this one, Harris typically thanked his patrons in a passive tone. Here, Harris's use of the active voice emphasises his authoritative and passionate contempt for war 'whose terrible deeds so desolate the earth'. He also 'trusts' his simple lyrics in an act of confidence quite at odds with his preceding prefaces. The only wavering note here is where Harris hopes that his work 'may' be welcomed. However, he is bold enough to name his 'philanthropic countrymen' and count himself as playing a part in promoting peace 'in some small measure'. Despite this use of a diminutive, the tone of this piece of writing is confident. Harris uses the phrase 'wild-wood warblings' to describe his 'muse', suggesting that there is something unnatural about war that is combatted by an approach that is more in tune with the natural world. This is in itself a Romantic conceit. Harris's desire to elevate humanity and his labouring-class peers in particular has much in common with other Romantic poets. Like Shelley, Harris believed that poets could be the 'unacknowledged legislators of the World'.<sup>368</sup> Harris's approach is perhaps less ferocious in its expressed intentions than Shelley who is closer to the 'sterner philosophy' in his aims than Harris's 'warbling muse'. As the above citation shows, Harris believed in the power of poetry to effect societal change. In terms of conventions, Harris's desire to elevate mankind has more in common with the Romantic poets than the Victorians.

The poems that follow Harris's preface in *The Two Giants* made his condemnation of war and its horrors entirely explicit. 'Bess Blew' is one of many poems with an anti-war theme:

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<sup>367</sup> Harris, *Two Giants*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>368</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 535.

“THERE'S a man at the door.” said little Bess Blew,  
“He’s lame, and disfigured, and looking for you :  
He would not come in. Go, mother, and see :  
I wonder whoever the stranger can be ?”

She stood by the dresser, and thought of the time  
When her father went off in the flush of his prime,  
With a sword by his side, and a gun in his hand,  
To follow the army, and fight with his band.

They promised him much in the way of renown,—  
A mantle of glory, and stars in his crown :  
But she could not believe very much they had said,  
And she wondered sometimes if her father were dead.

Strange sounds meet her ears with sudden surprise :  
There’s hugging and kissing and wiping of eyes :  
And soon to the neck of her father she flew,  
For he had no arms to lift little Bess Blew.<sup>369</sup>

This poem has some predictable and sentimental qualities, but its message is blunt and unflinching. Harris has often been characterised throughout this thesis as a conservative poet and, in many senses, he can be perceived in that way. The example above, however, shows a strong anti-establishment sentiment where Harris casts himself in a prophet-like role, clearly influenced by the Romantic movement. The explicit criticism of ‘They promised him much in the way of renown— | A mantle of glory, and stars in his crown’

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<sup>369</sup> Harris, *Two Giants*, pp. 57-58.

suggests the duplicity of the military who are, in essence, a part of the establishment subordinate to the will of the government. The ‘stars’ that Bess’s father imagines he will achieve also point to what Harris sees as baser qualities in human nature – such as unalloyed ambition at the expense of human suffering. Even though she is a child, Bess doubts the promises of the military. In the second stanza, she suggests how duplicitous they are. Further to this, the poem’s extensive use of rhyming couplets gives an upbeat and positive air to the poem that juxtaposes with its unpleasant denouement.

While he was clearly influenced by the Romantic notion of being a prophet, Harris never placed himself in a position where he actively criticised ruling governments or individuals specifically and was happier to talk about ideas like war in the abstract. This meant that he allowed his Romantic impulse to effect change to surface in his poetry but was careful to avoid directly criticising the people responsible for a progressive era like the Victorian one. As Chapter 2 of this thesis observes, the general message of his corpus was acceptable enough for him to be awarded a small grant from the Royal Bounty Fund. This would not have been forthcoming had he been perceived to be an active critic of governmental policy. P.M.S. Dawson reminds us that certain Victorian poets took a more activist line from the Romantics:

we must recognize that what were slogans to the politicians were matters of genuine concern to the poets; they took the universal claims of middle-class liberalism seriously, and this had important consequences. It meant that the radical working-class reformers could draw on the liberal poets to define their own political demands and aspirations, left unfulfilled by the success of the bourgeois

revolution. Byron and Shelley enjoyed a high reputation with the radical Owenites and Chartists.<sup>370</sup>

Harris was not an Owenite or Chartist; neither was he a radical working-class reformer. This again complicates Harris's position in relation to Romanticism. In some senses, he was inspired by notions of elevating and improving mankind. He was a humanitarian who was concerned for people's welfare. However, he was not a true anti-establishment rebel in the Romantic sense. Harris may have admired Shelley but, as a committed Christian, he would not have condoned Shelley's pamphlet on the importance of atheism. All of Harris's urging people towards pacificism was gentler in its approach than that of the Romantics. Nevertheless, it was out of line with the dominant ideologies of the Victorian era where the Crimean war was perceived as a necessity due to its threat to Britain's commercial interests. Harris's true interest lay in promoting a gentle Christianity which focused on harmonising mankind with the natural world. This is because, for Harris, engaging with the natural world was as close as Harris could get to God.

#### Harris's Gothic aesthetic

Despite its primary focus on the natural environment, Harris's corpus also bears the marked influence of the Romantic movement's notions of antiquity and the Gothic. Sean Purchase outlines the origins of the Gothic in the Romantic period thus:

That Gothic literature has its origins in the Romantic period is important to bear in mind because it helps to contextualize the problems and ideas that preoccupied the Victorians. In brief, late eighteenth-century Europe was overshadowed by two

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<sup>370</sup> P.M.S. Dawson, 'Poetry in an age of revolution', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; repr. 2003), pp. 48-73 (p. 68).

momentous events: the British Industrial Revolution and French Revolution in 1789, and these upheavals produced, or rather reconfigured, two new spectres for Romantic and Victorian Britain. [...] It is [...] characterized by the fear that that which is 'past', such as British Catholicism, that which should remain repressed or taboo, might return to haunt the present [...] it is that which transgresses the 'bounds of reality and possibility'.<sup>371</sup>

The implicit fear of the past embodied in Purchase's notion of the Gothic is quite applicable to Harris's use of it in his corpus. The specific conventions of the Gothic were defined by Purchase as including,

a certain taste for mystery, danger, dark secrets, suspense, melodrama, exaggeration, eeriness, ghosts, monsters, vampires, moving statues, blood, murder, rape, incest and vice. Vintage Gothic settings are equally well known. They include ruined abbeys, convents, graveyards, sinister castles, gloomy hallways and bedchambers, as well as lonely windswept landscapes with scudding clouds and moonlight.<sup>372</sup>

The themes and symbols alluded to by Purchase are correlative with definitive Gothic texts of the eighteenth century, such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) with its moving statues and setting of a ruined castle and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1769) with its thematic concerns around inappropriate sexual relationships. These ideas and motifs also appear in Gothic texts of the nineteenth century in novels such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) with its focus on the monstrous double of Hyde and *Dracula* (1897) with its sinister castle, lonely landscape, and cast of supernatural monsters. Gothic conventions

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<sup>371</sup> Sean Purchase, *Key Concepts in Victorian Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 79.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

also make an appearance in the nineteenth-century poetry of Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) and Lizzie Siddall (1829-1862) with their thematic concerns of death and mortality. It was also apparent in the work of Edgar Allan Poe with his unrelenting morbid themes of ghosts, madness, and lost love in 'The Raven' (1845).

Despite these commonalities in the Gothic between its inception as a genre in the eighteenth century and its nineteenth-century iterations, it becomes much more fragmented and polymorphous in the early nineteenth century. Julian Wolfreys confirms that 'the gothic can then no longer be figured from the 1820s onwards, as a single, identifiable *corpus*.'<sup>373</sup> Wolfreys points to what he terms as an escape of the Gothic into more diverse and less obvious realms than the strait jacketed forms of the early eighteenth century commenting that 'escaping from the tomb and the castle, the monastery and the mansion, the gothic arguably becomes more potentially terrifying because of its ability to manifest itself and variations of itself anywhere'.<sup>374</sup> Wolfreys's comments about the instability of the Gothic and its ability to manifest itself anywhere is reflective of Purchase's comment that 'which should remain repressed or taboo, might return to haunt the present'.<sup>375</sup> For the Victorians, there were taboos which they did not want to haunt their 'progressive' era.

John Harris's poem 'Luda: A Lay of the Druids', which was published in 1868, makes use of a melange of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century appropriations of the Gothic to explore some of the taboos of Victorian society. In this poem, Harris appropriates some Gothic conventions to explore ideas around pre-Christian religion such as Druidism. 'Luda' is an extended poem focused on druidic rites and a battle at Carn Brea castle; the poem was inspired by the Cornish antiquarian William Borlase's 'evidence' of druidic rights at the

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<sup>373</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> Purchase, p. 79.

top of Carn Brea. These are referred to in footnotes throughout the poem. Several of the Gothic preoccupations identified by Purchase can be found in the poem. The first book of 'Luda' is concerned with a messenger explaining to a local war chief called Rouanes that he is about to be invaded by Danish forces. The exact timing of the setting is unclear although its druidic themes would suggest Harris has based the story in pre-Roman times. The second book of 'Luda' then begins with some extensive scene setting by Harris. He begins this section by describing a druidic ritual. His account of imagined druidic rites is melodramatic, exaggerated, and violent featuring human sacrifice. Harris makes use of the Druids' association with the oak to begin his imagined version of a ritual sacrifice:

Oak-leaves upon the altar lie,  
And sprinkled is the holy ground,  
While the assembly wait around :  
Some naked forms are standing there  
With paint upon their bodies bare.  
The Druid's prayer is now begun ;  
Turning his body to the sun,  
He walks around the excited throng,  
His thick beard streaming white and long.  
The fated victim's hour is come ;  
The trumpet clangs, and sounds the drum ;  
Shake the hoar rocks, and bows the wood ;  
Full fifty arrows drink his blood.  
The altar-fire flames up the sky,  
And the straw image blazes high :  
Intemperance howls with hideous roar—

Thank Heaven, these rites will rage no more. <sup>376</sup>

A cursory reading of this extract reveals some of the conventions of the Gothic previously established. The scene is itself melodramatic with the assembled throng 'excited' to take part in a human sacrifice and the 'hideous roar' of intemperance. These words add a hyperbolic and excessive feel to the scene reminiscent of Wolfreys' comment that the 'gothic is clearly always already excessive, grotesque, overflowing its own boundaries and limits'.<sup>377</sup> Harris is quite bold in his depiction of excitement at ritualised murder although he proves slightly squeamish when describing the actual act, cursorily anthropomorphising the 'arrows' that 'drink' the victim's 'blood' rather than describe an actual murder. This technique has connotations of vampirism and the occult. As well as anthropomorphising the means of the victim's death, the personification of 'intemperance' as a Pagan deity suggests Harris's horror at what he perceives to be a barbaric pre-Christian religion. For Harris, the Gothic is a way of exploring this spectre of the past which he hopes will never again inform the present. The word 'intemperance' connotes Harris's concerns about what he perceived to be the destructive nature of alcohol consumption which led to ungodly and uncivilised behaviour. Wolfreys' comment that 'the impropriety of gothic sensibility is such that, even before the genre's historical or cultural demise [...] it leaves its traces in its audience to return again and again' shows Harris's utilisation of Gothic tropes to explore his own anxieties about a society not informed by Christian principles.<sup>378</sup> Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) suggestion that man was a product of evolution as opposed to a distinct being made by God carried several negative implications for a religious man like Harris. One of these was likely to have been an anxiety around mankind's reversal to a less civilised state. If man was a product of the natural world, he was not an immediate creation of God with all of his omnipotence and omniscience. This made it more possible for

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<sup>376</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 27.

<sup>377</sup> Wolfreys, p. 8.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*



mankind to revert to some kind of Pagan primitivism as his origins were with godless and primitive animals. This would have been a source of genuine anxiety for Harris. His Christian beliefs espoused God as the creator of all things and the source of comfort to man in times of hardship. Further to this, Harris's God was peace loving and would have disapproved of the violent battles depicted in 'Luda'. If God were to be replaced with the narrative of Science, it would lead to a society in which nothing could be relied upon other than the law of animals and the most non-Christian behaviour would be entirely acceptable. For a poet who could not write a stanza without including a religious precept, it is hard to imagine the level of concern these scientific developments would have caused him.

This passage also reads as Harris using elements of antiquity for entertainment. Fiona Stafford clarifies that the Romantics also used the Gothic to entertain:

During the Romantic period, however, many of the prevailing cultural trends were questioned, complicated or even rejected, and although the taste for ruins and melancholy was by no means forgotten, the forms it assumed were rather different. Ruined castles and abbeys, no longer necessarily sites for meditations on the transience of human life or vanished societies, were now seized as settings for exciting Gothic narratives, with room for supernatural elements difficult to accommodate in more realistic, modern situations. Poems such as Coleridge's 'Christabel', Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* or Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' all included medieval architecture to create an otherworldly atmosphere, in which anything seemed possible. Darkness and gloom often seemed the most congenial conditions for imaginative freedom, so even a tale filled with terrors offered pleasurable reading, if well told.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Stafford, p. 13.

Stafford's reference to darkness and gloom seeming the most congenial to imaginative freedom is evident in 'Luda'. Harris's appropriation of the Gothic also supports him in imagining the highly implausible narrative of the poem where two armies battle at Carn Brea. The lack of concrete knowledge about pre-Christian religion available to Harris allowed him to exercise his imaginative faculties to offer his audience the 'terrors' of pleasurable reading.

The citation below is part of the opening section of 'Luda'. Harris sets the scene by describing the hill of Carn Brea using a large degree of poetic licence to set a tone of calm before the inevitable storm of the conflict between the two armies later in the poem:

'T is eve, 't is calm ; the winds are still ;  
Not e'en a whisper walks the hill ;  
In silent groups the lilies lie,  
Nor tremble as the stream steals by ;  
The closing flowers in garments fair  
Beneath the twilight seem at prayer ;  
The rushes stir not by the lake,  
The bramble bends not in the brake ;  
The oak is moveless on the moor ;  
The hawthorn near the herdsman's door,  
The larch adown the lengthen'd lane,  
The willow by the warrior's fane,  
The ivy o'er the fortress gray,  
No leaf is lifted on the spray ;  
And Peace in many a fair festoon

Is singing to the rising moon.<sup>380</sup>

Again, Harris's description loosely correlates with the convention of 'lonely windswept landscapes with scudding clouds and moonlight'.<sup>381</sup> The use of a still landscape at the start of Harris's poem shows a lack of animation. If God is the creator of the world in all of its rhapsodic wonder, one might expect a bit more activity than this. It is interesting to consider whether this lack of wind is conflated with or interpretable as an absence of divine speech representing an absence of God's presence as Harris uses this trope in other works such as 'Land's End' where he hears God's voice in the 'matin breezes'.<sup>382</sup> Harris's description of the natural world in this chapter is fuelled with the ecstatic movement of nature created and animated by God. In the previous quotation from 'Luda', it is apparent that nature is inanimate; therefore, there is no God and something else has surfaced: in this instance it is the paralysing fear of pre-Christian religion haunting a landscape devoid of Christian values. If God has not created this landscape, then Harris's rhapsodic celebration of nature as part of God's omnipotence and omniscience is gone. It is no longer possible for Harris to worship God as there is no evidence of his existence or attempts to communicate with mankind. If there is no evidence of these intentions, it also makes God's instructions to the apostles harder to credit. Thus Harris's whole belief system which was so intrinsic to his poetry, beliefs, and desire to influence is destroyed.

The overarching feeling of this extract is of a haunting of the landscape, ironically due to its pure lack of motion. It is as if it is possessed by the surfacing of the pre-Christian religion that preceded it. Wolfreys' defines haunting as

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<sup>380</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 4.

<sup>381</sup> Purchase, p. 80.

<sup>382</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 77.

[inhabiting] and, in creating an uncanny response, [manifesting] itself not as arriving from elsewhere but instead making itself felt, as Mark Wigley suggests, in an act of ‘surfacing’ [...] in a return of the repressed as a foreign element that strangely seems to belong to the very domain that renders it foreign.<sup>383</sup>

Wolfrey’s notions of haunting correlate well with what is likely to be happening here. The ‘repressed foreign element’ of pre-Christian religion has surfaced in the poem. It makes its presence felt by arresting activity in the domain that has rendered it foreign. The ‘otherworldly’ atmosphere referred to by Stafford certainly enables Harris to liberate the imagination of his readers while he explores notions around antiquity and pre-Christian religion. It also creates a sense of tension and suspense which is then followed up by the more dramatic battle scenes of the story.

Harris’s use of Gothic conventions reaches its apotheosis in ‘Luda’, but he also makes some extremely idiosyncratic use of it in some of his earlier work. A much quoted extract from Harris’s longer poem, ‘Christian Heroism’ highlights this contradiction in his corpus. This poem is extremely wide ranging in themes and tone and has already been mentioned in this thesis. It opens with a celebration of one of John Wesley’s many visits to Cornwall, this is then followed by a large section that promotes the inculcation of religious values on a young boy. The narrative then shifts to what is presumably the pious young man grown up and working with another miner. After an incident occurs underground when a fuse is lit too early and only one of the two miners can escape into the makeshift lift, the miner we have been introduced to previously in the poem sacrifices himself. His rationale is that no one would mourn him but that his colleague has a family who would be left bereft. The citation that follows details the miners’ descent into the mine which comes near the climax of the poem. Harris’s use of Gothic conventions here is again reminiscent of Wolfrey’s

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<sup>383</sup> Wolfreys, p. 111.

comments about the amorphous nature of the Gothic in the nineteenth century.<sup>384</sup>

Furthermore, Bridget M. Marshall confirms that the early nineteenth century had made use of the genre to condemn the inhuman working conditions of factories:

William Godwin's 1805 novel *Fleetwood, or the New Man of Feeling* was the first fictional depiction of the specific conditions that made factories the 'Gothic hell' that Thomas Man would go on to call them in 1833.<sup>385</sup>

The notion of a 'Gothic hell' is fair description of Harris's more evocative writing around his experiences of being a miner. In this extract, Harris uses the underground world of mining to generate a fabulist representation of a kind of underworld inspiring awe and dread in equal measure:

Hast ever seen a mine ? Hast ever been  
Down in its fabled grottoes, wall'd with gems,  
And canopied with torrid mineral-belts,  
That blaze within the fiery orifice ?  
Hast ever, by the glimmer of the lamp,  
Or the fast-waning taper, gone down, down,  
Towards the earth's dread centre, where wise men  
Have told us that the earthquake is conceived,  
And great Vesuvius hath his lava-house,  
Which bums and burns for ever, shooting forth  
As from a fountain of eternal fire ?  
Hast ever heard, within this prison-house,

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>385</sup> Bridget M. Marshall, *Industrial Gothic: Workers, Exploitation and Urbanization in Transatlantic Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021), p. 1.

The startling hoof of Fear ? the' eternal flow  
Of some dread meaning whispering to thy soul ?  
Hast ever seen the miner at his toil,  
Following his obscure work below, below,  
Where not a single sun-ray visits him,  
But all is darkness and perpetual night ?  
Here the dull god of gloom unrivall'd reigns,<sup>386</sup>

It seems that Harris is making use of Gothic conventions for several purposes. From a structural point of view, the piety of the miner's earlier experiences is starkly contrasted with this underworld which has connotations of hell. The implicit suggestion of this extract might be that religion and piety are necessary fortifications for working underground. Harris juxtaposes items of material gain to Harris's employers such as 'gems' and 'torrid mineral belts' with the 'fiery orifice' that accompanies them. The meaning of the word 'torrid' is full of difficulty or challenge as well as very dry. The word 'orifice' also has connotations of a form of portal to hell. The opening lines of this citation are certainly invested with the mystery and danger of the Gothic. In this instance, it has been hybridised with nineteenth-century notions of progress and industrialism to represent that this work is a taboo to polite society who do not wish to concern themselves with the working environment of the men who make their money for them. The implicitly political reading of this is supported by Harris's use of a rhetorical question, 'Hast ever seen a mine?', which is clearly aimed at an audience who have not. The hell-like qualities of the mine are further emphasised in material and spiritual terms as this extract progresses. Harris refers to the 'earth's dread centre' refusing a capital to a proper noun or the capitalisation of personification to Earth yet also implying that a mine is a place where God is absent and some other supernatural presence reigns with the 'startling hoof' of fear reminiscent of

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<sup>386</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, pp. 42-3.

depictions of Satan as well as the ‘dread whispering’. The diminishing of the light is perhaps also symbolic of God’s diminishing influence. Harris reiterates his earlier rhetorical question with more specificity asking the reader to consider the miner who is ruled over by the ‘god of gloom’ and therefore exposed to these Satanic and unchristian influences. The concluding part reinforces Harris’s adoption of the conventions of the Gothic to represent a taboo to his middle-class readership. Whether the rendering of this taboo is for salacious entertainment or an implicitly political criticism of the work of miners’ lives which caused some of their ungodly behaviour is not possible to confirm. In any event, it is a powerfully idiosyncratic piece of writing which shows Harris’s appropriation of Gothic conventions to excellent effect. Despite the merits of this piece of writing, it is important to situate it within the nineteenth century’s relationship with the Gothic and with industrialisation. Marshall acknowledges that in the nineteenth century ‘fiction and non-fiction illustrating the lives of miners (or colliers), iron workers and railway workers all employ similar Gothic rhetoric and devices.’<sup>387</sup> Therefore, although Harris’s rendering of the mine as a form of underworld is effective, it is not out of step with the literary mores of the era.

A complete reading of Harris’s corpus with its occasional Gothic flourishes, flights of imaginative fancy, and dogmatic religious commentary might make it seem quite idiosyncratic in its stylings. Although it would serve the arguments of this thesis to make this claim about Harris’s poem, Andrew Smith and William Hughes explain that it was not uncommon to use parts of the Gothic as parts of an exciting narrative in the Victorian era and that it was a key component of much of the era’s popular fiction:

First, it has been widely noted that sensation fiction from the 1850s onwards reworked a number of issues which were to be found in the earlier Gothic tradition.

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<sup>387</sup> Marshall, p. 14.

Alison Milbank has convincingly argued that the work of Dickens and Collins, for example, drew upon earlier female Gothic tropes. Second, there are clearly very popular Gothic texts by authors such as William Harrison Ainsworth, G.W.M. Reynolds and James Malcom Rymer; and the Victorian period seems further to have represented something of a heyday for the ghost story, with significant contributions from Dickens, Gaskell and Oliphant, amongst many others.<sup>388</sup>

The reworking of Gothic elements into Victorian stories is typical of the era's approach to its recent literary history. The writers' reappropriation of some of the Romantics' poetry to further their own ideologies and values has already been alluded to earlier in this chapter. The immense popularity of the Gothic in the sensation novels in the 1850s does offer a potential explanation to Harris's inclusion of these features in 'Luda' which was published in 1868. Although writers like Dickens were members of the Victorian literary establishment and Harris was not, it is likely that both writers' composite use of genre conventions served a similar purpose which was to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. In Dickens's case, this would have made commercial sense while Harris would have been trying to ensure the engagement of his patrons who subscribed to his books.

Despite Smith's and Hughes's comments, it is also possible to argue that, as well as engaging and entertaining his readership, Harris's use of Gothic conventions is essentially political and in debt to the emancipatory nature of the politics of Romanticism with its desire to elevate the individual. The anxieties implicit in 'Luda' and 'Christian Heroism' about a world in which Christianity has been replaced with Science and industrialisation make use of Gothic conventions to express Harris's anxieties about these changes as well

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<sup>388</sup> Andrew Smith and William Hughes, 'Introduction: Locating the Victorian Gothic', in *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; repr. 2014), pp. 1-14 (pp. 2-3).



as imbuing them with a sense of threat for his readership. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that despite his outwardly facing conservatism, much of Harris's writing is highly political in its intentions and his appropriation of the Gothic as a trope to disguise these inclinations is yet further evidence of this.

### Orality and the bardic tradition

As has been established, the direct influence of eighteenth-century Romanticism and the Victorian era's appropriation of the movement itself appear to co-exist in Harris's corpus. A further and perhaps more direct influence of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century is in the orality of Harris's work which is interlinked with his perception of himself as coming from the Bardic tradition. Fiona Stafford confirms the Romantic fascination with sound and orality,

Many writers of the Romantic period attempted to capture something of the living voice through the medium of print, whether through a lyric moment such as this, or in the more practical shape of song-books and ballad-collections. The urge to record speech and song often gave rise to elegiac acknowledgements of vanishing folk traditions, but it also introduced exciting new dimensions to Romantic poetry. Some of the most striking poetic innovations of the period arose from the new awareness of the relationship between orality and literacy, whether through the revival of the ballad as a sophisticated literary form, or through the development of new kinds. [...] Many Romantic poems share Wordsworth's fascination with hearing a human voice and with the related task of conveying sounds through the visual medium of the printed word.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Stafford, p. 139.

Romantics such as Wordsworth wished to co-opt the sound of the human voice into poetry to achieve a form of synthesis between the printed and spoken word. This also recorded dialects which had been lost to posterity due to their anonymous and traditional origins. Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane confirm that this attitude supported labouring-class poets who often adapted poems from an oral tradition into print. They observe that ‘several of Robert Burns’s poems and songs, often brilliantly fashioned out of oral-traditional materials, moved into print but also back into oral tradition’ which showed the intertwined nature of both oral composition and the printed word in this era.<sup>390</sup> As a labouring-class poet, Burns was able to benefit from this prevailing attitude and contribute towards the hybridity of these two traditions. Burns’s contribution to both oral and written traditions also explains his huge level of influence and popularity.

Burns was a significant and formative influence on Harris. Describing his formative encounters with Burns as a child, Harris comments that after ‘repeatedly perusing’ Burns’s poem ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’, he was able to understand it and that it was a ‘delight’ to do so.<sup>391</sup> It is not immediately apparent what would be so appealing to a child about Burns’s poem but in his article, ‘John Harris — A Weaving of Traditions’, Andrew Symons comments that linguistically, Harris and Burns had more in common than might seem obvious:

[Harris’s] appreciation of Burns also stems from a common tradition. Burns was, on his mother’s side a Brythonic Celt like Harris and was reared to the speech

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<sup>390</sup> Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane, ‘The medium of Romantic poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 239-262 (p. 243).

<sup>391</sup> Harris, *Shaksperes’s Shrine, An Indian Story. Essays, and Poems*, p. 3

rhythms and mythology of a Brythonic area — the old British kingdom of Strathclyde.<sup>392</sup>

Symons's observation that Harris and Burns are united by the speech rhythms and mythology of the Brythonic area explains Harris's formative love of Burns. The speech which he perused so avidly as a child would have appealed to him due to its similarity to his own. Harris's love of Burns continued as an adult and he recounts an incident in his biography where he was criticised by a member of the community for reading him in public:

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself ! You, a local preacher, and reading Burns !”  
This strange sin placed me quite beyond the reach of her favours, and I do not remember her ever speaking to me afterwards. But no strictures of her could induce me to shut up this fountain of pure melody.<sup>393</sup>

Burns was controversial due to his general licentiousness which explains the horror of Harris's critic in this extract. However, the 'pure melody' described by Harris reinforces Symons's point that there was an oral quality to Burns' work that Harris found irresistible. This would have been due to its resemblance to the speech rhythms of Harris's own voice. Despite Burns's reputation, Burns's religious attitudes and Harris's were very similar which further enhanced his appeal to Harris. Symons clarifies that 'Harris intuitively understood Burns and his temperament, and would have sympathised with his aversion to Calvinism.'<sup>394</sup> The Calvinist notion that only a few could be saved was in direct opposition

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<sup>392</sup> Andrew Symons, 'John Harris: A Weaving of Traditions', *An Baner Kernewek*, 82 (1995), 11-12 (p. 11).

<sup>393</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 64.

<sup>394</sup> Symons, p. 11.

to adherents to Wesleyans like Harris. Harris believed that all could achieve salvation and is a founding principle of his poetry and his drive to communicate.

Burns is important to talk about in the context of Harris's orality as he made him realise the dualism of language that has the ability to influence both on and off the page. As Harris wished to influence as many people as possible, it is not hard to understand why Burns exerted such power over him. Indeed, by the methods of his composition and his desire to influence, Harris's orality very much places him in the bardic tradition. Andrew Symons confirms that,

Yet when one reflects on Welsh bardic verse — eulogy, lament narrative, religion, morality and nature, in forms specifically related to oral presentation one becomes increasingly aware of Harris as belonging to a comparable cultural tradition.<sup>395</sup>

All of the aspects ascribed by Symons to the Welsh bardic tradition correlate with Harris. His corpus is littered with eulogies and lament narratives. Examples include a complete 'In Memoriam' section in *A Story of Carn Brea* dedicated to both local and national figures such as the Prince Consort.<sup>396</sup> In *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* Harris includes the lament narrative 'On the Death of My Daughter Lucretia'.<sup>397</sup> Religion, morality and nature are also recurring themes in nearly every poem in his corpus.

Harris certainly presented himself as part of the bardic tradition. His first collection's title of *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain* suggests that his work is supposed to be sung. This is emphasised by the word 'lay' which refers to poems with songs and melody as their central features. Indeed, in Harris's 'Preface to the Second Edition' further

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<sup>395</sup> Symons, p. 11.

<sup>396</sup> Harris, *A Story of Carn Brea. Essays and Poems*, pp. 179-81.

<sup>397</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, pp. 146-48.

he refers to himself not as a 'learned bard'.<sup>398</sup> Harris's negation reminds us of his lack of formal education. His use of the word 'bard' as opposed to 'poet' suggests that Harris saw himself, at least in his initial collection, as someone recording an oral tradition onto paper. This has much in common with the Romantics' approach to oral culture where they 'attempted to capture something of the living voice through the medium of print, whether through a lyric moment such as this, or in the more practical shape of song-books and ballad-collections'.<sup>399</sup> In portraying his poems as lays and implying that his aspirations lie within the bardic tradition, Harris is certainly aligning himself with Romantic notions of orality and the desire to influence his peers both on the page and when hearing him read aloud.

Harris's facility with sound in his poetry can also be attributed to his method of composition. In his autobiography, he explains:

My father walked before, and I followed at a short distance behind him ; and often the whole journey was traversed without scarcely a word having been passed between us. But all this time I was at my rhyming, quietly putting my thoughts together, and writing them in some shady corner of the kitchen on my return.<sup>400</sup>

Harris's process of composition was partially driven by his circumstances. He was too poor to afford reams of paper with which to draft and re-draft work. Composing poetry in his head whilst working or walking meant that he was able to refine some of his work before he ever committed it to paper. However, to write off this method of composition as pure expedience also misses the point to a certain extent. Much of Harris's work is focused on deconstructing the man's subordinate relationship with God and how man's actions on

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>399</sup> Stafford, p. 139.

<sup>400</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 46.

the earthly plane bear no influence to the divine plan. These ideas are in line with the idea that salvation in heaven should be a man's primary interest as opposed to indulging his own vanities. As Harris wished to influence these were often simply and directly put. An example of this can be found in the section entitled 'Early Effusions' from *A Story of Carn Brea*, and the poem 'Fall of the Old Mine Stack'. The first stanza of the latter uses onomatopoeia to great effect:

MAN'S noblest works will fall,  
The strongest arches crack,  
And Earth's proud cities all  
Be like the old mine stack.<sup>401</sup>

Harris's use of the sole onomatopoeic word 'crack' in the stanza is juxtaposed with an abundance of words with masculine endings to reinforce the auditory impression of the stressing of the mine stack as it is beginning to fall or, at the very least, to foreshadow it later in the poem. Later in the poem, in the fifth stanza, Harris uses alliteration with plosives to reinforce the direct sharp fall of the mine stack:

We watch'd it day by day,  
Smote with the storm-king black,  
Till with a solemn roar  
Down dash'd the old mine stack.<sup>402</sup>

The alliterative use of plosives by Harris in the closing line of the stanza achieves some excellent sonic effects commensurate with the Romantics' urge to create the sound with

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<sup>401</sup> Harris, *A Story of Carn Brea. Essays and Poems*, p. 231.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

the written word. The combination of the plosives in ‘down dash’d’ suggests the speed and heaviness of the fall of the stack. The fact that the two words are also monosyllabic increases the implied speed of the fall. This is particularly reinforced in the line ‘man’s noblest works will fall’ implying that anything manmade pales in significance with God’s creations. The weather is personified briefly as the mine is ‘smote with the storm-king black’ evidencing nature’s and therefore God’s dominance.

Harris’s identification of himself as a bard with his connotations of orality and musicality very much aligned him with the Romantics’ fascination with the printed word to convey sound. This is an area in which his corpus betrays the direct influence of Romanticism. This level of accomplished musicality in his work is yet another area in which he has been overlooked with his composite of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century influences yielding to the reader a high level of competency as well as originality.

#### Conclusion: Harris’s idiosyncratic Romantic stylings

It is evident that the scientific, political, and religious tensions of the Victorian era led to some extremely interesting poetry. Despite Harris’s Romantic and rhapsodic celebration of the natural world, D.M. Thomas believes that the tensions between industrialisation and Romanticism are responsible for some of Harris’s best work, observing that ‘ironically, it seems that that black, hated and engulfing beauty was his muse; within a few years of his leaving her, his gift not so much faded as became smothered.’<sup>403</sup> Thomas’s reference to that ‘black, hated and engulfing beauty’ of the mine is perceptive as this is where Harris’s contribution to our understanding of Romanticism is significant. Harris has also been shown to have appropriated, in line with Victorian literary approaches, the conventions of the Gothic to embed political statements and create taboos and anxieties.

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<sup>403</sup> *The Granite Kingdom Poems of Cornwall*, ed. by D.M Thomas, p. 13.

Further examples of the complexity of Harris's influences is evident when exploring Romantic notions of conveying sound through the written word. Harris appropriates much of Wordsworth's fascination with conveying the printed word through sound with a high level of dexterity. As redolent as this is of Romanticism, Harris then chooses the Victorian topics of industrialisation as his inspiration to convey these effects rather than renew his focus on the natural and organic world.

The hybridity of Harris's voice is startling; it is distinct and original. In his melange of Romantic conventions and Victorian ideologies a unique voice begins to appear where different styles and conventions chatter and break in on each other in a polymorphous blend of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century influences. These are most startling when they shift between Romantic idealism and practical reality. These are states which Harris appeared to be able to occupy as a poet. The citation below is from the concluding section of 'Christian Heroism'. After a Romantic interlude lulling his audience into a false sense of security, Harris details the process of two miners blasting rock underground:

Come, let us leave the fields and flowers behind,  
The murmuring brooklet where the poet walks,  
Weaving life's cobwebs into silken flowers  
To beautify the homes of fatherland.  
Come, let us leave the beauteous light of day,  
The bower of roses, and the Muses' haunt,  
Where the green ivy roofs us over head :  
And go down, down into the earth's black breast,  
Where, in the bottom of a shaft, two men  
Prepare e'en now to blast the solid rock.



The hole is bored ; the powder is confined ;  
The fuse is fix'd,—it cannot be drawn forth.  
They negligently cut it with a stone  
Against a rod of iron. Fire is struck !  
The fuse is hissing : and they fly, both fly,  
Towards the bucket, taking hold thereon.<sup>404</sup>

The first seven lines are conventionally Romantic. Nature is personified with ‘the murmuring brooklet’. This is a recurring metaphor in Harris’s corpus where he equates organic sounds such as running water with the voice of God. The Romantic belief in the creative power of the individual is referenced by the weaving of cobwebs into silken flowers. This power to trans mutate and transform is evident throughout much of Harris’s corpus. However, in the next section he declines to do it. Shorn of figurative language, the men bore the rock and fix the fuse. A mistake is made and only one can survive. One man sacrifices himself for the promise of eternal reward in Heaven. The shift between tones is striking and symptomatic of Harris at his most idiosyncratic. The beauty of the natural world is identified in Romantic terms but then the cold hard reality of mining life begins, and the tone reflects this. Harris’s tonal shift is almost mocking, contrasting the beautiful life above ground only to stun the reader with the matter of fact of death of one of the miners. This is accomplished in itself but I would argue that the situation is more complex . For Harris, the natural world is an expression of God's beauty. The underground is the Romantic’s *bête-noire*: a black hearted Godless place full of death and suffering. To sanctify it with the language of romance would be to sanctify the damaging of the sacred world of God that has occurred in the search for progress.

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<sup>404</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, pp. 43-44.

Throughout this chapter, it has been established that Harris was a poet heavily influenced by the conventions of the Romantic era. In parts of Harris's corpus, it is clear that, like other Victorian poets, Harris appropriated some of the conventions of the literary movement for his own purposes. This is evident in his appropriation of Wordsworth's sentimental qualities for his own reflections about childhood. Despite this, much of Harris's corpus is Romantic in its *intention* as well as its influences. Harris's desire to influence and elevate his race is far more Romantic than the Victorian ideology of celebrating the era for its progressive qualities. This chapter has argued that although Harris cannot be defined as a Romantic poet *per se* the influence of the period on his work is distinct. The fact that Harris appropriates the ideas of the Romantics into his work to produce poetry that is striking in its idiosyncratically imaginative quality is even more noteworthy. Harris's discovery of an implicitly ecstatic vision of God in both natural environments as well as those of industrialisation, making him a truly unique Victorian poet.

## Chapter 5: On the precipice: formal agency and temperance in Harris's *Caleb Cliff*

Chapter 4 of this thesis established and explored Harris's complex relationship with Romanticism. It suggested that Harris's appropriation of Romanticism shows the direct influences of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century as well as the Victorian appropriation of this literary movement during the nineteenth century. The combination of these two aspects in Harris's work is powerfully idiosyncratic. This chapter focuses on Harris's formal capabilities. It notes that idiosyncratic qualities in Harris's use of metre can be found in his corpus. This chapter initially considers the hybridised discourse of labouring-class poetics arguing that even when labouring-class poets adopted the established literary forms of middle-class tastemakers, they were still producing idiosyncratic writing due to not being middle-class themselves. It then outlines the context of prosody in the nineteenth century observing that this was an era where metrical schemes were abundant and that the political nature of metre and its affectivity were recurring themes in its critical discourse. After establishing this, I argue that Harris's writing in 'Caleb Cliff' makes original and skilful use of metre. In fact, his use of metre in this dramatic fragment is so nuanced that it both develops Harris's characterisation as well as achieving somatic impacts on the reader and listener which go far beyond their cognition of his words.

### The hybrid discourse of labouring-class poetics

Keegan and Goodridge implicitly refer to John Harris as a poet with 'Parnassian aspirations'.<sup>405</sup> Chapter 3 of this thesis explained Brian Maidment's definition 'Parnassian' as referring to poets from a labouring-class social background whose writing was influenced by the literary establishment. These poets had no desire or intention to write in

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<sup>405</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 225.

a style representative of their own modest background. Harris's 'Parnassian ambitions' are evident in his consistent use of various established literary forms such as blank verse in his corpus. This chapter explores the 'Parnassian ambitions' of Harris's writing to discover an idiosyncratic poet influenced by the metrical debates of the nineteenth century. It discovers a poet whose appropriation, juxtaposition and mastery of an almost dizzying amount of metrical forms collaborate to achieve direct somatic impacts on the reader in line with the Victorian belief in the affectivity of poetry.

Harris's love for Shakespeare and winning of the Shakespeare tercentenary prize in 1864 has been alluded to previously in this thesis. The Shakespeare tercentenary competition was a celebration of the three hundred years anniversary of the birth of Shakespeare and was based in Stratford-upon-Avon where he was born. Further details of the competition were given by the *Birmingham Gazette*:

Prizes had previously been offered for the first and second best poems on Shakespere. These prizes consisted of two watches,— a gold and silver one, manufactured by Messrs. Rotherham, with appropriate engraving on the cases. About one hundred poems were sent in, under mottoes, the real names of the writers being contained in sealed envelopes ; and none of the names of the competitors were made known till Friday evening, when the envelopes containing the names of the successful ones were opened in public by the Mayor at an entertainment given at the Corn Exchange.<sup>406</sup>

The anonymity of the entrants shows that the work was being judged on its own terms. The literary status of the competition was emphasised by the *Coventry Herald* which observed that

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<sup>406</sup> Harris, *Shaksperes's Shrine, An Indian Story. Essays, and Poems*, pp. 128-29.

the assistance of several able men of letters having previously been obtained as adjudicators. Advertisements were inserted in a great number of literary and other journals in the metropolis, Coventry, Birmingham, and elsewhere, which resulted in a numerous list of competitors.<sup>407</sup>

There is no list of competitors extant so it is not possible to know which specific members of the literary establishment may have contributed. The judges are described as ‘able men of letters’ and the competition was advertised in literary journals. One of the judges was George Dawson, a minister who held nonconformist and civic minded views of Christianity. He was also a lecturer in English Literature and so would have been able to offer an informed decision on the quality of Harris’s work.<sup>408</sup> Harris begins his prize-winning poem by describing a young man reading Shakespeare by a ‘Cornish Cross’. It is interesting to note that this boy is not invested with any class status or discrete identity in this poem although presumably Harris is writing about himself. The boy’s reading of the bard so consumes him that he ignores passers-by in his excitement at what he has read. The poem then goes on to praise the quality of Shakespeare’s work, his imaginative power and his relatability to people of differing social and economic backgrounds. In the closing stanza of the poem, Harris places his avatar in line with Shakespeare:

Thus lay that musing boy,  
Whose soul was hot with joy,  
Environ’d in a hemisphere of rays ;  
And in the mystic light

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>408</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica. Vol. 7*, 11th edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), p. 874.

## The genius of the height

Brought him a lyre, which he, enraptured, plays :<sup>409</sup>

Ambitiously, Harris appears to have seen himself as being handed the lyre of inspiration from Shakespeare. Thematically, the poem does not focus on class or social mobility. Formally, its composition is a synthesis of iambic trimeter and pentameter which shows Harris's accomplishment with the iambic method of composition used by Shakespeare. Iambic pentameter is prevalent in much of Shakespeare's writing and Harris's choice of trimeter is particularly appropriate for the song like qualities of Harris's poem. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* confirms that iambic trimeter is very 'suitable for song'.<sup>410</sup> This would explain why Harris has chosen this form of metre in particular instances to reinforce his uncontrolled and joyous celebration of the bard himself while also displaying his versatility with form.

For Harris, Shakespeare is timeless and classless. His avatar is 'enraptured' by the 'light' of Shakespeare's work, and this gives him the urge to write himself. This is one reason why scholarship and appreciation of Harris's formal accomplishments has been so limited. He does not comfortably fit into the stereotypes perpetuated and established by previous scholarship in this area which usually focus on celebrating writers who are politically motivated or have anticipated the literary trends of modernism in their writing. Harris made extensive use of the formal conventions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry and, by his own admission, his intention was to reinforce the dominant ideologies of the era. In his introduction to *Shakspeare's Shrine*, his third poetry collection, he comments (referring to himself in the third person) that 'though the publication of his former works has not yielded him pecuniary profit, yet they have won for him the friendship of many of

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<sup>409</sup> Harris, *Shaksperes's Shrine, An Indian Story. Essays, and Poems*, p. 133.

<sup>410</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene, 4th edn (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1459.

the gifted and good throughout the land.’<sup>411</sup> Harris’s use of the third person to write about himself is ubiquitous across all of his poetry collections and is an example of performative modesty as he is essentially praising and promoting his own work.

In chapter three of this thesis, Bridget Keegan is cited as referring to the ‘hybrid discourse’ of labouring-class poets.<sup>412</sup> She suggested that labouring-class poets were more focused on the natural world as they were commonly engaged in manual employment such as agriculture and therefore lived in more rural areas. This was a direct and uncomplicated influence on their work. Contrastingly, urban poets who were part of the literary establishment were in dialogue with each other and producing work that focuses on a greater level of sophisticated abstraction where landscape was used as a trope as opposed to a direct source of inspiration. Keegan is correct when she argues that any engagement with a topic is an engagement with ‘symbolic practices’ which caused as much disassociation and abstraction for rural labouring-class poets as it did for the urban literati.<sup>413</sup> Therefore, these two groups of poets are not so different after all. For Harris, nature was not a set of biologically connected, causative processes, it was a direct representation of the splendour of God’s creation. This is nowhere more evident than in his poem ‘Hedges’ where he claims to hear God’s voice in the natural organic world as opposed to the urban one:

O leave the city's hum,  
To the still hedges come,  
And learn the lessons taught at dying day ;  
The voice of the Great Sire

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<sup>411</sup> Harris, *Shaksperes’s Shrine, An Indian Story. Essays, and Poems*, p. iii.

<sup>412</sup> Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry*, p. 7.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

Is heard among the briar,  
And silent thoughts come stealing, “Kneel and pray.”<sup>414</sup>

The voice of the ‘Great Sire’ is of course God. The silence of the natural world enables Harris to hear his message to pray due to the quiet and uncomplicated nature of the natural world compared with the bustle of the urban one. However, as Keegan has observed, by reducing this silence into a paean to God, Harris is abstracting it into a representation of the divine as opposed to celebrating the biological intricacies of flora or their aesthetic value which might bring him ‘closer to nature’. Instead, nature brings him closer to God.

Keegan’s concept of ‘hybrid discourse’ is also central to evaluating Harris’s accomplishments in formal terms as this chapter develops. Harris’s appropriation and hybridisation of metrical forms to promote divine messages around self-control, abstinence, and temperance are worthy of investigation and will be considered later in this chapter.

#### ‘A Great Multiplication of Meters’: Victorian uses of metre in context<sup>415</sup>

The effects of metre on understanding can be traced back to beyond the Victorian era. Simon Jarvis comments on the differing opinions of Wordsworth and Coleridge on the purposes of metrical composition in the eighteenth century:

For Coleridge, Meter’s chief function was a symbolic one. [...] Meter is a sign, which produces certain expectations about other linguistic features of the poem.

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<sup>414</sup> Harris, *A Story of Carn Brea*, p. 155.

<sup>415</sup> Jason David Hall, ‘Introduction: A Great Multiplication of Meters’, in *meter matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011, pp. 1-25 (p. 1).



[...] For Wordsworth, on the other hand, meter is not primarily a sign but, instead, is essentially connected to the fundamental organization of human knowing itself.<sup>416</sup>

For Wordsworth, metre is connected with 'human knowing'. This is expanded upon in his 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads':

Now the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion.<sup>417</sup>

This suggests that the metre of a poem was key to emphasising as well as regulating its meaning. This interpretation is also suggested by Matthew Campbell who observes that,

Wordsworth suggested how we can establish that poetic form is 'not strictly related to the passion'. A metre which need not correspond with, or might even work against, the fiction or imagined speech in poetry (as in Wordsworth's blank verse, or his use of the ballad).<sup>418</sup>

Metre did not just signal that a person was reading a poem; it was essential to how efficaciously ideas were communicated. Jarvis further cites a possibly apocryphal conversation between Shelley and Byron where Shelley's idea of the deliberate crafting of

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<sup>416</sup> Simon Jarvis, 'Thinking in verse', in *British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 98-116 (p. 98).

<sup>417</sup> W. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and other Poems*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Longman & Rees, 1802) I, p. xlvii.

<sup>418</sup> Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; repr. 2001), p. 110.

specific effects in poetry is dismissed by Byron with the word ‘Pish!’ showing that even poets disagreed over how formal effects functioned.<sup>419</sup>

Byron’s and Shelley’s debate was carried into the nineteenth century. The Victorian era saw both an extensive enquiry into the history of metre and a multiplicity of approaches to metrical composition. The purpose of this extensive level of exploration is explained by Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell:

The nineteenth century has been described as an age of many stylizations but no definite style: an age in which artists “experimented, and the experimenters all had one purpose in mind: to find a style instead of trying to get along with parodies of style.”<sup>420</sup>

This comment makes sense when viewed in the context of the ideologies of the Victorian era, which was essentially forward looking and progressive. As cited in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Robin Gilmour’s comments on the ‘active public virtues of a new civilisation’ led by ‘prophets of progress’ support the idea that for a new progressive era of humanity, a new and progressive form of poetry was needed to celebrate it.<sup>421</sup> Despite this urge to create something new, nineteenth-century prosody pushed the envelope rather than tearing it up completely. Gross and McDowell emphasise that ‘the general prosody of Romantic and Victorian poetry strains but does not abrogate the syllable stress tradition.’<sup>422</sup> This suggests that the extensive exploration of past uses of metre were being used to inform the era’s present. Yopie Prins confirms the depth of this evaluation and investigation into the historical uses of metre:

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<sup>419</sup> Simon Jarvis, p. 100.

<sup>420</sup> Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn (U.S.A: University of Michigan, 1968; repr. 2000), p. 75.

<sup>421</sup> Gilmour, p. 27.

<sup>422</sup> Gross and McDowell, p. 75.

The publication of historical surveys and theoretical treatises on meter rose dramatically throughout the Victorian period, ranging from Edwin Guest's *A History of English Rhythms* (1838, revised 1882) to George Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody* (1906–10), and peaking mid-century with the *New Prosody of Coventry Patmore* and his contemporaries, and again at the end of the century, with the circulation of numerous polemical pamphlets and scholarly debates about meter.<sup>423</sup>

Prins emphasises the importance of placing 'Victorian debates about meter within their own historical context in order to emphasize the cultural significance of formalist reading'.<sup>424</sup> For Harris, this means that he was writing in an era where metre was both being written about extensively and theorised. This level of investigation was also combined with people experimenting and innovating with metre itself in order to try and find new and definitive forms. Jason David Hall confirms the diversity of metrical form in the Victorian era commenting that 'so staggering was the "multitude of metres" in circulation that nineteenth-century poets and readers sometimes struggled to make sense of—not to mention agree on—matters of versification.'<sup>425</sup> Hall also reminds us of the powerfully symbolic nature of metre, observing that 'along with the century's profusion of prosody came much disagreement about what meter was and how it functioned.'<sup>426</sup> Meredith Martin is time specific about Victorian experiments and enquiry into metrical discourse commenting that 'metrical discourse flourished in the nineteenth century but it intensified toward the 1880s and into the early twentieth century.'<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Yopie Prins, 'Victorian meters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; repr. 2005), pp. 89-113 (p. 89).

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>425</sup> Hall, p. 2.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1.

Harris was alive from 1820–1884 and continued to produce work right up until his death. That he was affected by these debates in some way is evident in the varied and idiosyncratic use of metrical form present in his corpus. As Gross and McDowell commented earlier, Harris’s use of prosody is in keeping with the explorations of the Victorian era as it places significant emphasis on forms which make use of syllable stresses.<sup>428</sup> An example of this can be found in some of one of Harris’s earliest poems, ‘Thoughts on Spring’. In the section entitled ‘March’, Harris puts his stresses on the religious themed ending of each line:

HAIL, early spring ! when buds and blossoms shine,  
And new-born flowerets make the earth Divine.  
Almighty Ruler, who hast all things made, —<sup>429</sup>

Harris’s use of iambic pentameter places his stressed endings around God’s brilliant powers of creation. The blossoms ‘shine’ which embody the ‘Divine’ who ‘made’ the earth. If these three words were read cursorily without a close reading of the lines that preceded them, they would still convey something of Harris’s message.

Harris’s corpus also makes extensive use of blank verse in many of his poems such as ‘Christian Heroism’. This poem’s focus on a miner who sacrificed himself to save another miner by jumping off an overloaded lift in a mine is set in blank verse to elevate the noble behaviour of its subjects by its use of an established literary form. An example of Harris’s panegyric is particularly evident towards the close of the poem:

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<sup>428</sup> Gross and McDowell, p. 75.

<sup>429</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 144.

I take the northern Czar,—him who, to build  
A city, and to call it by his name,  
Once sacrificed a hundred thousand men !  
I take him with his soul besmear'd in gore,  
And place him, crown'd, and worshipp'd, and adored,  
Beside this Christian miner, who, to save  
His comrade's life, sublimely gave his own !  
I take them, and I place them, side by side,  
Upon the world's great platform, and I ask,  
“WHICH of them is the hero ?”<sup>430</sup>

Harris's thematic and formal concerns match perfectly here. His dismissal of the 'northern Czar' who is praised for the deaths of thousands of men is juxtaposed with the 'Christian miner' who sacrificed his own life for his comrades. Harris's use of iambic pentameter elevates his colleague to a status commensurate with those of the elevated classes due to his adoption of this style.

As has been established in Chapter 1, most of the reviews of Harris's poetry focused on the man rather than the poet. For most middle-class literary reviewers, the fact that, as an uneducated miner, Harris wrote poetry at all was remarkable, and they studiously avoid any engagement with the formal attributes of his work. The review below is from *The Graphic*, a nineteenth-century magazine. *The Graphic* was established in December 1869 by William Luson Thomas. It was inspired by the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin and primarily wished to use some of the best artists of the time to represent the destitution of the urban poor both working and at home. It also included literary reviews and its

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<sup>430</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, p. 45.

acknowledgement of Harris's formal capabilities is distinctive when the atypical poetry review of labouring-class poets tended to a thematic as opposed to a formal treatment. *The Graphic* is quite specific when evaluating Harris's formal attributes commenting that,

MR. JOHN HARRIS, the Cornish Poet, has for many years attracted favourable attention from those who admire pure and simple verse ; and the number of his admirers will not be diminished by his latest production. The longer pieces, which are in dramatic form, show a power over blank verse which might give a lesson to many poets of more pretensions.<sup>431</sup>

This reviewer's reference to 'pure and simple verse' shows that Harris is using these forms effectively and as originally intended. Harris's lack of adaptation is implied by the adjective 'simple', but the word 'pure' also implies that Harris's writing uses the form of blank verse accurately and competently. The phrase 'of more pretensions' suggests Harris's facility with metre was strong compared with some of his more aspirational contemporaries who, in their desire to innovate, produced less effective work. This viewpoint also correlates with the magazine's innate sympathy towards the labouring-class man and its ambition to humanise him. The specific piece of work referred to by the critic is 'Bulo' a dramatic fragment about a family whose calamitous change in fortunes is revived by stranger to whom they show kindness. The citation below goes some way to explaining the critic's view of Harris's ability with blank verse. The section of the below fragment comes from the opening of the play where the characters of Anleaf and her daughter, Bulo are woken in the middle of the night to offer support to a shipwrecked sailor:

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<sup>431</sup> Harris, *Walks with the Wild Flowers*, p. 149.

Anleaf. And still this knocking ! What intruder  
scares  
The dark-winged Night, and hurries sleep away  
Where torrents lift their voices, and the bat  
Sports with the moonbeams in the old church lane  
Beside the Woodsman's cottage ? Bulo, up,<sup>432</sup>

Harris's use of iambic pentameter is used effectively to both convey the anxiety of the speaker at her unknown visitor as well as the rhythmic sound of the knocking. Small details such as the stress placed on 'lift' and 'bat' in the third line also serve to add a degree of affectivity with the stressed syllables being imitative of lift and the flight of the bat.

Harris's abilities are not just confined to a facility with blank verse. Little critical feedback is offered of Harris's formal capabilities after his death but, as previously mentioned, his schoolteacher son, John Howard Harris wrote a biography in 1885 entitled *John Harris, The Cornish Poet. The Story of his Life*. This book is essentially a re-telling of Harris's autobiography with a few personal embellishments and anecdotes from Howard Harris. However, he also attempts a brief piece of formal criticism of his father offering the view that he had mastered Spenserian and Byronic stanzas.<sup>433</sup> Harris's facility with the Spenserian stanza is evident in some of his longer narrative poems such as 'Monro'.

The book that John Howard Harris refers to is an extended verse narrative about a miner called Monro who sets out to serve both Jesus and poetry. The poem contains many themes that recur in Harris's corpus such as a celebration of Cornwall, domesticity, moral courage, nature, and God. Monro's character is essentially Harris. He works in scenes from his own

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<sup>432</sup> John Harris, *Bulo; Reuben Ross; A Tale of the Manacles; Hymn, Song, and Story* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1871), pp. 3-4.

<sup>433</sup> John Howard Harris, p. 78.

childhood, youth, marriage, and mining experiences as well as his visits around the country and his experiences of being a Bible-reader to structure and order the narrative. Harris's grasp of Spenserian stanzas is confirmed in the poem's opening lines:

He oped his eyes in the October calm,  
    When every rill rang songful through the shade,  
When Nature breathed her ripest, richest balm,  
    And orchard-branches to the sward were weighed ;  
When lay-full leaves, with edges half-decayed,  
    Rang song and sonnet to the rolling year,  
And Beauty donned her berries in the glade,  
    And voices walked the willows far and near,  
And fell like old-world psalms upon the listening ear.<sup>434</sup>

This piece of writing is very effective. Harris makes a smooth connection between the birth of Monro and the associative pathetic fallacy of the calm weather suggesting the mildness of his character. The fecundity of nature with her 'ripest, richest balm' and 'orchard branches [...] weighed' is used as a trope to imply the level of creativity contained in Monro's character. Harris skilfully sets up God's influence on Monro due to his creation of an Edenic natural environment. This is evident in the line 'And voices walked the willows far and near | And fell like old-world psalms upon the listening ear.' The ear is Monro's and he is already influenced by the divine within seconds of his birth. From a formal perspective, Harris's use of the ababbcbcc rhyme scheme connotes further levels of meaning due to his poetic judgement. The feminine ending of 'calm' and 'balm' adds a definitive sense of peace to the moment of Monro's birth whereas the masculine ending of 'shade' and 'weighed' adds an emphasis to both the ever-increasing sprawl of shade and

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<sup>434</sup> John Harris, *Monro* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1879), p. 2.



the increasing weight of the branches. There are also some very effective uses of stresses here. ‘Oped’ is stressed in the first line of the citation to emphasise the active qualities of Monro’s awakening and birth. The word ‘psalms’ is also stressed to show the importance of God to Harris’s character. The poem’s use of Spenserian stanzas is most likely a reference to or acknowledgement of Robert Burns’s poem ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ which I allude to in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Despite the acknowledged formal influences of Byron and Spenser, the fact that much of Harris’s corpus is written in blank verse is attributable to his love of Milton and Shakespeare. Parts of *Bulo* (the dramatic fragment cited previously) bear the heavy influence of Shakespeare – for example, there is a scene describing a shipwreck which is reminiscent of *The Tempest*:

Our bark rose like a feather on the foam,  
And then sank down into the horrid depths ;  
And thus we drifted, losing all command,  
The mighty winds being master. Soon the helm  
Broke, and the creaking masts crashed overboard.  
“Lost,” cried the captain, and the face of Death  
Frowned in the flashing foam. We had with us  
A lovely maiden from another isle,  
Whose tale of love was passing pitiful.<sup>435</sup>

Harris’s description of the defeatist captain is reminiscent of Act 1, Scene 1 of *The Tempest* where the Boatswain instructs Gonzalo to ‘give thanks’ that he had ‘lived so long’

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<sup>435</sup> Harris, *Bulo; Reuben Ross; A Tale of the Manacles; Hymn, Song, and Story*, p. 11.

when faced with the threat of an insuperable storm.<sup>436</sup> The personified ‘face of Death’ that ‘frowned in the flashing foam seems similar to Ariel’s claim that at the brink of the shipwreck Ferdinand cried ‘Hell is empty | And all the devils are here’.<sup>437</sup> Harris’s use of iambic pentameter here is skilled. The simile ‘like feather on the foam’ combines stressed and unstressed syllables in the word ‘feather’ to connote the directionless vulnerability of the bark. By making the ‘fea-’ section of the word the stressed close of the third iamb and beginning the fourth with the unstressed ‘-ther’ Harris also creates a sense of lightness and vulnerability. This is further reinforced by the combination of soft consonants in the word ‘feather’. The boat is in danger of being broken apart in the storm and this is mirrored by Harris breaking up his figurative word choice between two iambs.

As we have seen, it was Harris’s admiration of Shakespeare that led to one of the key achievements of his literary career. Milton’s use of blank verse was also an accepted and English metrical choice which would have given Harris the intellectual credibility he appeared to have craved. John Addington Symonds’s *The Blank Verse of Milton* observes that ‘blank verse is a type and symbol of our national literary spirit.’<sup>438</sup> The notion that literature was a civilising influence that reinforced core British values over the savagery of the lower orders is confirmed by Meredith Martin:

From the beginning of institutionalized English literary education—ostensibly with Lord Macaulay’s great “Minute on Education” in 1835 through Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869—great works of literature, and especially poetry, were believed to have the power to civilize and shape the otherwise disordered

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<sup>436</sup> William Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1988; repr. 1998), p. 1169.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1171.

<sup>438</sup> Meredith Martin, p. 88.

minds of the masses and thus safeguard English society from the “savages” (or the philistine working class)<sup>439</sup>

Blank verse was the epitome of Englishness as well as being a cultural reference to two significant literary reputations. Harris’s use of it was a direct tribute to his literary forbears; however, it was also a sign that he was a literary, civilised man capable of instructing his working class peers and ‘thus safeguard English society from “savages” (or the philistine working class).<sup>440</sup> Meredith Martin points to the political, social, and cultural ideologies behind metre commenting that ‘its strict prosodic rules meant a smoothly functioning, civilized literary and national culture.’<sup>441</sup> This idea is reinforced at an educational level by Matthew Arnold who, when reporting on the state of education in 1852, offered the following observation about the lack of understanding that the average student had about literary composition and its potential benefits on their social mobility:

I cannot but think that, with a body of young men son highly instructed, too little attention has hitherto been paid to this side of education ; the side through which it chiefly forms the character [...] I am sure that the study of portions of the best English authors, and composition, might with advantage be made a part of their regular course of instruction to a much greater degree than it is at present. Such a training would tend to elevate and humanize a number of young men, who, at present [...] are wholly uncultivated ; and it would have the great social advantage of tending to bring them into intellectual sympathy with the educated of the upper classes.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>442</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852–1882*, ed. by Right Hon. Sir Francis Richard Sandford, K.C.B (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), pp. 19-20.

Arnold's comment reinforces the idea that an understanding of the best of English literary culture as well as practising composition would civilise the average student is evident here. His comment about 'intellectual sympathy' suggests that through these aforementioned processes, pupils would be able to achieve an awareness and understanding of their social superiors which would have been previously unavailable to them.

This sort of sympathy was of importance to Harris due to the endemic prejudice towards miners at this time. It was a common view in the Victorian era where miners were often depicted as uncivilised in both national and local presses. Paul Newman cites an example from the *West Briton* to emphasise the general antipathy towards Cornish miners:

There exists an account of a group of 19th century miners marching from St Day to Redruth in order to engage in a mob fight. They came across a dog *en route* which they killed, staining their flag with the poor animal's blood [...] *The West Briton* (1848) carried a faintly contemptuous description of a fair at Redruth, noting how most of the men were attired in fine broad cloth, and their wives "flaunting flounces." The "holes and dens" they had emerged from, the writer remarked, "more resemble pig-styes than human abodes."<sup>443</sup>

This description is slightly disparaging and slightly contemptuous. Zoomorphism is used to reinforce the less than human nature of the miner as they emerge from 'pig-styes' as opposed to human abodes. Despite this negativity, Keegan and Goodridge comment that in comparison with their Northern counterparts, Cornish miners got off relatively lightly:

While Cornish tin miners did not suffer the same "bad press" as northern coal miners, even in the mid-nineteenth century, the reputation of miners as a "race

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<sup>443</sup> Newman, pp. 26-27.

apart” was, as Vicinus has argued, the focus of a good deal of union-related propaganda, written to help the miners’ cause. The miner in Harris’s poem [“The Mine”] demonstrates sufficient piety, humility, and domesticity to counter the stereotype of savagery ascribed to his fellow workers.<sup>444</sup>

Keegan and Goodridge’s observations reinforce the negative stereotyping of miners in the Victorian era. Harris’s formal choices helped to set him apart from other labouring-class poets and were an indication of his subservience, civility, and moral rectitude.

Although Harris made many deliberate decisions in terms of versification, he is reluctant to engage with his reasoning to the reader. The prefaces to his poetry collections prefer to muddy the waters of his own agency. When reflecting on his choice of formal conventions in *Bulo*, Harris refers to himself in the third person in accordance with the conventions of the time and states: ‘Why he has chosen the form of the Drama for his longer pieces he has no reason to assign, and must leave this to the clemency of his readers.’<sup>445</sup> This kind of authorial disavowal has its antecedents in the seventeenth century as confirmed by Lennard J. Davis who comments that ‘authors of English novels of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries almost always begin their works with a preface asserting that they are presenting not a fiction but a factual account of some real series of events.’<sup>446</sup> Davies explains that these disavowals serve as defence against any charges of immorality:

[A]uthorial disavowal can be dismissed as conventional humility; the eighteenth-century novelist was being circumspect in the same way an Elizabethan gentleman poet might have been in finding it distasteful to openly solicit a printer for his

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<sup>444</sup> Keegan and Goodridge, p. 228.

<sup>445</sup> Harris, *Bulo; Reuben Ross; A Tale of the Manacles; Hymn, Song and Story*, p. viii.

<sup>446</sup> Lennard J. Davis, ‘A Social History of Fact and Fiction: Authorial Disavowal in the Early English Novel’, in *Literature and Society*, ed. by Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), pp. 120-148 (p. 120).

works [...] authors are seen as knowingly setting up minor deceptions to defend themselves in advance against moral condemnation.<sup>447</sup>

This fear of moral condemnation would have been more acute for Harris than Davies's apocryphal 'Elizabethan gentlemen' as he was a labouring-class man from a religious background who needed the support of his social superiors if they were to support him in achieving publication of his work.

It is axiomatic that there is always literary judgement with any choice including Harris's choice of drama with its established use of iambic pentameter for 'Bulo'. Eric Griffiths observes that

The instance of a practical connection between the prosodic features of a language and intelligibility demonstrates a link between what might be thought of as the 'form' and the 'content' of an utterance, a link existing in the material medium of the language. Rhythm and cadence belong to the intelligibility of utterances, and not only in the literary uses of language.<sup>448</sup>

Griffiths' comment suggests rhythm and cadence are central to the intelligibility of the written word. It is hard to credit Harris with the lack of agency he ascribes himself when he uses the drama form and iambic pentameter with such precision in 'Bulo'. In fact, his open disavowal of formal choices reinforces the fact that he was aware that this was indeed a choice at all. It would seem that fear of exhibiting too much intelligence and agency alongside the conventional authorial disavowals inhibited Harris from drawing any attention to his own virtuosity.

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-21.

<sup>448</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 19-20.

The concepts of ‘quality’ and ‘value’ in Victorian poetry seem to find their clearest definition when viewed in accordance with the ideologies of the era. The progressive nature of the Victorian period with increasing levels of mechanisation, productivity, and effectiveness meant that these new developments were mirrored in poetry with a search for new and definable forms that celebrated the achievements of this great age. The nineteenth-century’s search for a poetry that had its own unique style has been identified by Gross and McDowell earlier in this chapter. However, this was also an era where the mastery of established types of poetry was perceived to be important when beginning to develop new forms of it. In spite of the volume of theorising about metre and the development of new forms, nearly all of Victorian poetics were rooted in the syllabically stressed approach that had preceded them in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In the case of Harris, his grounding and competency in these types of composition led to him producing some idiosyncratic writing informed by his literary antecedents but also with a desire to hybridise and adapt these forms to this progressive age.

God is in the metre: the role of prosody in essaying God’s creation in John Harris’s poetic vision

As a deeply religious man, Harris believed in the omniscience of God. One of the first formative experiences he describes in his autobiography is a walk with his father at an impressionable age:

The firmament was covered with stars, shining in silvery splendour through the clear air. How brightly they beamed in their mystic orbits in the blue deeps of ether  
! And so near were we, standing on the crest of the mount, that in my childishness

it seemed as if I could put forth my hand and touch them. The universe looked a bright palace of gems, where angels banqueted at the table of love. [...] Suddenly my father, in a soft and solemn voice befitting the majesty of the moment, exclaimed, “God is the author of all this, my son : ‘He made the stars also.’ ”<sup>449</sup>

This evidences that Harris’s first experiences of the sublime are inextricably interlinked with God. Harris’s use of the word ‘author’ is of note and he quotes his father, who accords God ‘authorship’ of creation. This is a view Harris obviously concurs with. Harris’s depth of religious feeling led him to conclude that all of his corpus was written in praise of God, and that his writing was something assigned to him by providence. This strand is developed in the prefaces to several collections of his work, where Harris again refers to himself in the third person:

[T]he pecuniary gains of his poetical labours have hitherto been next to nothing, he is still inclined to hope on, and feels no disposition to murmur and give up the pleasant work which nature and Providence have assigned him, believing that in some small measure his simple effusions have brought, and yet will bring, comfort to the hearts of his fellow-men, and, what is greater than all, glory to the name of Him who is the Giver of every good gift.<sup>450</sup>

The use of the word ‘nature’ in the sense that Harris outlines it here would suggest that he saw his fate as pre-determined. Harris saw his writing as an outlet for the will and voice of God and part of his unifying influence over all things. There is also an underlying arrogance to Harris’s statement. Although any ‘gift’ Harris may have has been bestowed upon him by God, Harris is offering his own judgement that it is both a ‘gift’ and that it

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<sup>449</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>450</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. iv.



needs to be shared. The idea that this ‘gift’ needs to be shared is of course, Harris’s, not God’s.

According to Harris, nature is a constituent part of God’s creation from which all wider rhythmic processes that inculcate life such as the heartbeat originate. Therefore, rhythm itself can be ascribed to God who must therefore be responsible for the pulse. This view is confirmed by Kirstie Blair, initially from a medical perspective. She refers to the Victorian writer Perceval Barton Lord who commented that the human heart remained beating without human attentiveness or will. This leads Blair to argue that Lord is implying that ‘the heart is controlled by an external force equivalent to God’s will.’<sup>451</sup> She states that in the Victorian era there is an emerging ‘negotiation between an older view of metre, based on classical prosody [...] and a more flexible stance [...] in the increased use of cardiac imagery in poetry and poetic theory’ and that ‘the rhythms of the human heart, similarly, are on one hand perceived as private, internal, affected by personal feeling; yet on the other, they are linked to universal movements and processes’.<sup>452</sup> Blair posits a wider connection between the rhythmic processes of the heartbeat, electricity, sound waves, and light waves connecting them to divine origins:

Depending on the point of view of the commentator, these wider rhythmic processes—frequently described in terms of pulsation—might either show the harmony of all living things or indicate that all human motions stemmed from God. Rhythm, that is, could be seen as part of a scientific, natural unity in which such forces as electricity, sound, and light waves are in tune with the same pulse, or as a religious tool, dictated by the will of God.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006; repr. 2010), p. 66.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*

If 'rhythm' is 'a religious tool dictated by the will of God' and metrical schemes such as blank verse are imitative of the heartbeat, then it would suggest that these forms of metre are of divine antecedents as they imitate what God has created. Thus, they are written in imitation of his 'voice' and 'rhythms'.

Blair goes on to explain the emerging understanding between metrical schemes and the functioning of the human body via the heartbeat:

The Victorian period, I want to suggest, was both the point at which the link between poetry, poetics, and the heartbeat seemed more than mere convention and was imagined as a physical, felt connection.<sup>454</sup>

Blair is suggesting that the rhythm of metre was directly associated with and could affect the rhythms of the heart. To show this from a nineteenth-century medical perspective, she cites the testimony of the doctor, James Wardrop:

The well-known doctor James Wardrop, in his work on heart disease, cites the case of a woman suffering from palpitations and an irregular pulse who was cured by participating in church worship: the reassuring rhythms of the psalms and hymns eased her pulse. In contrast, stops, starts, halts, and momentary disruptions to rhythm threaten the stability of the pulse and the smooth continuation of the poem itself.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-9.

Harris's writing supports Blair's arguments. The meditative and soothing use of blank verse in the extract from 'A Story of Carn Brea' is replete with images of a divine voice acting upon Harris and his fellow man:

The Sabbath bells are ringing, vale and wood,  
And rock, and ridge, and slope with mosses dress'd,  
Seem hung with echoes ; wandering voices flow  
Upon the spirit, lulling it to peace,  
And gentle visions fill the mind with heaven.  
Beneath this honeysuckle let me sit  
In quiet meditation. <sup>456</sup>

In this extract, Harris makes use of the unifying even rhythms of blank verse to portray the perfect nature of the scene. It is undulating, beating, or pulsing in perfect time due to God's animus. Harris's use of the 'Sabbath bells' foreshadow and frame the rest of this extract. Man's formal and ritualised praise of God is then echoed in the 'rock and ridge' which, in a direct reference to God's creative powers, are 'with mosses dress'd' suggesting this is a scene of divine and artful construction. The fact that echoes are 'hung' is a metaphor that further reinforces the decorative agency of the divine. The 'wandering voices' that 'flow upon the spirit, lulling it to peace' represent the voice of God which, unsurprisingly, 'fill the mind with heaven.' The poem's narrator asks to sit in 'quiet meditation' reinforcing the somatic effect of the formal structure of the poem.

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<sup>456</sup> Harris, *A Story of Carn Brea*, p. 22

## The symbolism of metre in John Harris's *Caleb Cliff*

The relationship between understanding, influence, and the effects of metre is nowhere more evident than in Harris's dramatic fragment 'Caleb Cliff'. 'Caleb Cliff' is a short play written primarily in blank verse. It tells the story of a man who, having succumbed to alcoholism, receives an intervention from an unnamed traveller and reforms, becoming financially successful and a strong advocate for temperance. Harris claimed that this play was inspired by actual historical events observing that it was 'founded on an incident which occurred in Cornwall within the recollection of the writer [...] He hopes this performance will not be unwelcome to the friends of temperance'.<sup>457</sup> 'Caleb Cliff' was published in 1868 which coincided with the debut publication of *The Methodist Temperance Magazine*. Despite its name, this magazine was a firm advocate for teetotalism as opposed to temperance. Teetotalism is complete abstinence from alcohol whereas temperance was drinking alcohol in moderation. The teetotal movement was introduced to Cornwall in 1832. In the words of John Lander, this was due to: 'concern [that] had been expressed in Cornwall about effects of excessive alcohol consumption in the eighteenth century.'<sup>458</sup> It is also important to consider the wider context of nineteenth-century anxieties around social behaviours such as drunkenness. Harris provides one such anecdote in his autobiography:

Once only I entered a beer-house alone with the intent of drinking. Many youths of my own age and occupation were sitting there, smoking and chatting over their cups. I looked around me for a few minutes, and concluded that if I continued to visit the alehouse I should grow up like these people, and not advance one single step beyond [my] present position. My resolve was quickly made, that, with the

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<sup>457</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. iv.

<sup>458</sup> John Lander, 'Cornish Methodism and the early growth of teetotalism', *The Journal of the Cornish Methodist Historical Association*, 10 (2003), 16-40 (p. 18).

help of Him whom I desire to serve, I would never alone enter such a place again—  
and I never did.<sup>459</sup>

Harris's comments about the infectious nature of unproductive behaviour were widely reflected in some of the anxieties of the nineteenth century. Athena Vrettos explains that there was a distinct belief in the nineteenth century that immoral behaviour could be transmitted between people just as physical disease could be. She cites the

fundamental permeability not only between body and mind but also between self and other. This dissolution of ontological boundaries suggested the possibility of a kind of mental or neurological contagion comparable to epidemics of organic disease [...] Gustave Le Bon claimed that “ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes”. [...] Like the more general fear of contagious diseases that spurred nineteenth-century drives for sanitary reform, the concept of a moral epidemic became a means through which both the scientific community and the population at large expressed concerns about physical and mental proximity of different peoples.<sup>460</sup>

The idea of ‘moral epidemic’ relates to issues around dissolute behaviour. Alcohol is primarily a social drug that is consumed in social contexts. This is confirmed by Harris’s observation that many youths of his own age were sitting there in the public house.<sup>461</sup> It was a matter of personal, social and political expediency for Harris to write about these matters in ‘Caleb Cliff’ as he was both addressing his own concerns and those of his social superiors who he describes in his preface to the poem as the ‘friends of temperance’.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 59.

<sup>460</sup> Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 84.

<sup>461</sup> Harris, *My Autobiography*, p. 59.

<sup>462</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. iv.

Presumably, they were friends of temperance for a variety of moral and health based reasons but it would also seem likely that the productivity of any of their employees would also be a factor.

‘Caleb Cliff’ is formally distinctive due to its use of prosody to achieve a range of effects on the reader. These include connoting characterisation to the reader via use of specific metrical schemes. As ‘Caleb Cliff’ was a piece of drama, it is reasonable to assume that Harris wrote it primarily to be performed and to achieve a material impact on his intended audience. He wanted to encourage them towards or reinforce their belief in complete abstinence from alcohol in line with the religious principles that he held.

Harris wrote ‘Caleb Cliff’ to change or, at the very least, affect his audience. The first part (as opposed to act) of the play begins with a discussion between a poor woman (who is Caleb’s wife) and a traveller. Caleb Cliff’s descent into drunkenness is explained via these two characters. We are then introduced to Caleb who initially refutes the Christian message of temperance from the traveller but towards the end of the first section complies as he experiences delirium tremens. The second part of the play contains a long monologue from Cliff explaining how he has reformed himself by becoming teetotal and, following this abstinence, prosperous. This is then followed by the marriage of Caleb’s son to the unnamed traveller’s daughter.

Throughout the play, metrical schemes are used to reinforce Harris’s religious convictions to the audience. The citation below from the first part of the play is Caleb’s response to the traveller’s attempts to get him to abstain from alcohol and find God:

*Drunken Man.* A sermon truly ! I’m too deep in drink

To be drawn out by any crotchety text

Or verse of Scripture. You talk well, you do,  
And my old granny taught me several things,  
Long words of meaning wing'd with points of law,  
Which once I thought were very wonderful,  
But now have quite forgotten.<sup>463</sup>

This is written primarily in blank verse with the non-conforming metrical line 'But now have quite forgotten' offering a sharp contrast with the rest of the speech. The use of blank verse shows Cliff is *capable* of reasoning, reflection, and discipline, and is reflected in the ordered metrical scheme. The last line 'But now have quite forgotten' is metrically non-conformist in order to reinforce Cliff's wavering inconsistency between what he should do and what he does. It also foreshadows that he will have more reflection to do before he is able to achieve sobriety and moderation. Harris's intentions with this play are to promote Christian values, both thematically and formally. Harris believed that God was responsible for everything and, as has been established previously, metre was another way of communicating his will.

Isobel Armstrong explains that Christian belief had a reductive and specific effect on prosody:

The coming of rhyme and stressed rather than quantitative verse coincides with Christian culture. Rhyme and stress together vastly reduce the formal elements available to the poet [...] Stress coincides with meaning, isolating the concept,

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<sup>463</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, pp. 85-86.

while rhyme draws attention both to the coincidence of material words and to the difference of meaning that severs them—<sup>464</sup>

Armstrong's observation that stresses coincide with meaning and isolate concepts is of particular use when considering how Harris is trying to reinforce religious dogma. The fact that, in the previous citation, Harris places unstressed syllables such as 'law' and 'do' at the ends of lines. This reinforces that Cliff is able to understand and place verbal emphasis on correct and appropriate behaviours. Similarly, the fact that Harris concludes the first line of Cliff's speech with drink as an unstressed syllable, shows he is unable to implement any control due to his inability to even place control over his pronunciation of it.

As has been discussed, Harris was influenced by the diverse range of metrical schemas of the era and their abilities to create differing connections and effects on the reader or listener. In the citation that follows, Harris chooses to use heptasyllabic lines to portray a drunken and unrepentant Cliff who has not heeded the traveller's guidance towards abstinence:

*[Drunken man sings:*

Fill the tankard foaming o'er ;

For I love it more and more.

I will drink till blinks the day ;

I will drink while parsons pray.

Fill the foaming tankard, fill ;

For I'm thirsty, thirsty still.

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<sup>464</sup> Isobel Armstrong, 'Meter and Meaning', in *meter matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 26-52 (p. 34).



I will drink while misers snore ;

Then I'll tumble on the floor.<sup>465</sup>

According to *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* 'in most metrical systems, lines of seven syllables are almost always variants of octosyllables, not an autonomous meter.'<sup>466</sup> Despite the fact that it is not regarded as an autonomous metre by this academic publication, evidence can be found of this metrical format in the works of Shakespeare, Donne and Longfellow. Referred to as catalectic trochaic tetrameter, it consists of three trochees and one incomplete foot. One of the most famous examples of Shakespeare's use of this metre is in the opening scene of *Macbeth* which introduces the three witches. It may have been that Harris was deliberately alluding to this to connote the fiendish or satanic nature of drunkenness. Paul Newman reminds us that,

Shakespeare had always been [Harris's] idol; he had pored over the plays and sonnets, finding many edifying saws and precepts. Frequently, he quoted the playwright to enliven his phraseology.<sup>467</sup>

Harris notes in his biographical sketch on Robert Bloomfield that 'the works of our great Shakespeare can now be obtained for a shilling' which makes clear that a collected works was not out of his financial reach.<sup>468</sup> In fact, Paul Newman confirms that some of the first books Harris buys for himself are a 'Bible, a hymn book and the works of Shakespeare'.<sup>469</sup>

It is unsurprising that Harris chooses catalectic trochaic tetrameter to connote the fiendish qualities of drunkenness in 'Caleb Cliff'. When Cliff observes that 'I will drink till blinks

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<sup>465</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 87.

<sup>466</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 618.

<sup>467</sup> Newman, pp. 75-76.

<sup>468</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 203.

<sup>469</sup> Newman, p. 30.

the day | I will drink while Parsons pray' he shows a similar dissonant and blasphemous quality against God's moral instruction which is connoted by Harris's formal choices.

In part two of 'Caleb Cliff', the metrical scheme changes yet again. A reformed, respectable, and teetotal Cliff leads his fellow villagers in a song that features eight syllables per lines:

There is no drink like water clear  
That gushes through the silent mere,  
Or bubbles from the mossy well,  
And murmurs down the rushy dell.  
So give me water, water clear,  
That gushes through the silent mere.<sup>470</sup>

The octosyllabic lines used to convey the purity of water as opposed to alcohol. If we return to Meredith Martin's observation about how Christianity has used the stresses in metrical schemes to isolate concepts, we can see that Harris has placed the majority of his stresses on the word 'water' as opposed to 'drink' to show the strength and purity of the natural world created by God compared with the manmade alcohol. 'Water' is also repeated three times in this extract to show its dominance over drink. Harris concludes this section with some especially dogmatic lines that again attribute the purity of water to its divine origins:

How pure it is in cup or glass,  
Or sparkling onward through the grass,  
Where little lambs delight to play,

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<sup>470</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, pp. 96-97.

And maidens meet at close of day !  
I'll not forget, while wandering here,  
To thank the Lord for water clear.<sup>471</sup>

Here, stresses are again placed on the words 'pure' and 'Lord' to emphasise the importance of Harris's Christian temperance message. This is accompanied by stresses on other aspects of the God-created natural world such as 'grass' and 'lambs'. The word 'lambs' also potentially connotes Jesus as the Lamb of God. The octosyllabic rhyme scheme used in this section has much in common with the lai. The lai is defined by the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* as

A short narrative or lyric poem, perhaps based on Celtic material [...] the oldest narrative *lais*, almost always written in octosyllables, are the *contes* or short romantic tales originated by Marie de France in the late 12th c. Most of them have Breton themes, chiefly love.<sup>472</sup>

Although 'Caleb Cliff' contains a strong temperance message, it also a love story. In the first part of the dramatic fragment, Cliff's relationship is dysfunctional with his love for alcohol supplanting the affection he feels for his wife, his family, and the divine. His newfound love for water represents a love of purity and a love of God's natural world as opposed to the manmade construction of alcoholic drinks.

Throughout 'Caleb Cliff', Harris utilises these varying metrical schemes to show the changes in Cliff's character. He veers between a reasoning drunkard, an excessive and licentious drunkard, and then a reformed abstinent person. These shifts in state are

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<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>472</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*, p. 780.

represented by blank verse, heptasyllabic lines, and octosyllabic lines reminiscent of the lai. Harris may well have taken inspiration for this kind of approach from his beloved Shakespeare who used similar approaches to emphasise characterisation. George T. Wright confirms that ‘brief waves of verse in other meters [...] serve mainly to change the rhythm or to provide a verse mode more appropriate for certain kinds of characters.’<sup>473</sup> The catalectic trochaic tetrameter he uses to show Caleb Cliff’s fiendish qualities under the influence of alcohol in the first act of his fragment contrasts with his joyful appropriation of the octosyllabic lai to convey his newfound love of purity in the second half. Underpinning all this is the otherwise consistent use of blank verse in the fragment to connote calm reasoning and to contrast with Cliff’s shifting moods.

#### Masculine discipline and the somatic effects of metre in ‘Caleb Cliff’

Throughout the first part of Harris’s dramatic fragment, Caleb Cliff’s biggest weakness is his lack of discipline. He wavers from considering the correct actions, which are represented by an orderly use of blank verse, to giving in to drunkenness which is symbolised by non-conforming metrical lines and heptasyllabic ones. Cliff’s central problem is that he lacks self-control. Both self-control and virtue were inextricably tied up with each other in the Victorian era. In *Masculinities and Culture*, John Beynon comments on a model of masculinity called Muscular Christianity with its ‘emphasis on character-building through courage, fortitude, patriotism and self-discipline as markers of an Imperial masculinity rooted in reason’.<sup>474</sup> This emphasis on self-discipline was necessary to the constant progression of the Victorian era, including its imperial expansion. If people were not productive and focused on their own desires as opposed to the greater good, then little could be achieved. Joanne Begiato confirms that ‘virtue and manliness [were]

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<sup>473</sup> George T. Wright, *Shakespeare’s Metrical Art* (London: University of California Press, 1988; repr. 1991), p. 114.

<sup>474</sup> John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 36

identical' in the Victorian era.<sup>475</sup> She cites the nineteenth-century minister and social reformer Hugh Stowell Brown 'telling his working-class audience that manliness "stands in strong and eternal antagonism to every form of Licentiousness"'.<sup>476</sup>

As Begiato observes

nineteenth-century men were required to manage their bodies and emotions; left unregulated, they could severely undermine manliness. Thus, physical and emotional self-control were essential to achieving manly qualities. Historians of masculinity demonstrate that Victorian men's character was forged in independence and self-discipline.<sup>477</sup>

If a Victorian man's character is forged in self-discipline, there is a complete lack of independence and self-discipline in Cliff's conduct which is at complete odds with the era's expectations of masculinity. This is emphasised in the fragment by his wife's recounting of his behaviour to an unnamed traveller in the first part of the play:

*Poor Woman.* Yes, thou shalt hear it. Caleb took to  
drink ;  
Yes, took to drink, which brought with wind and hail  
A sea of ruin on us. First he walk'd  
With heedful step along the slippery brink,  
And said, "I'll go no further." Then he strode

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<sup>475</sup> Joanne Begiato, 'Punishing the Unregulated Manly Body and Emotions in Early Victorian England', in *The Victorian Male Body*, ed. by Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 46-64 (p. 46).

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

A little nearer, nearer, nearer still,  
When one thick morn, entirely off his guard,  
And charm'd with poppies growing near the brink,  
He slipp'd and fell, and dragg'd us all below.<sup>478</sup>

The poor woman is quick to point out that Cliff initially attempts some form of self-control. This is evident in the 'heedful step'. However, Harris extends this metaphor of temptation with Cliff moving 'nearer, nearer still' until he 'slips'. The choice of this verb suggests that Cliff's initial abandoning of his 'heedful step' places him in a position where his lack of self-discipline makes him extreme vulnerable.

Notions of self-discipline control occur in many Christian religious denominations of the nineteenth century. Methodism went as far as to advocate specific forms of self-regulating behaviour on a daily basis. Adrian R. Bailey, David C. Harvey and Catherine Brace explain that,

Through an evangelical reading of scripture, Methodists developed a religious understanding of the processes involved in the historic enculturation of bodily dispositions, which recommended particular forms of everyday conduct.<sup>479</sup>

Caleb Cliff's life in this play 'slips' from the 'brink' as has been evidenced in the previous citation. He deviates further and further from his previous sober conduct which leads him to the situation he is experiencing.

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<sup>478</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>479</sup> Adrian R. Bailey, David C. Harvey and Catherine Brace, 'Disciplining Youthful Methodist Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Cornwall', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97 (2007), 142-157 (p. 143).

Harris was a strong advocate for temperance and wished to facilitate his audience's self-discipline and sobriety through the medium of poetic form. The word form is key to understanding Harris's attempts to influence his audience. Our contemporary notions of literary influence tend towards the cerebral and thematic influence of poetry. During previous literary eras, more somatic powers of influence have been ascribed to the form of poetry itself as opposed to just its content. This is the notion that poetry is able to have a direct physical influence on the body that may shortcut the cognitive and conscious processes, sometimes known as affect theory. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg define affect as

at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us [...] or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability.<sup>480</sup>

Seigworth and Gregg comments suggest that affect lies beyond knowing but also propels us towards movement or suspends it. In short, affect creates a direct response on the body that is not necessarily filtered through conscious and reactive thought processes.

Jason R. Rudy argues that 'Victorian readers understood the connections between bodily and poetic experience in ways that took more seriously the unself-conscious effects of poetic form.'<sup>481</sup> Rudy's observation confirms that, for many nineteenth-century readers,

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<sup>480</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

<sup>481</sup> Jason R. Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), p. 3.

this almost physical rendering of images with words would have seemed much more natural remarking that

the energy transferred from poem to reader occurs here through the medium of the thinking brain. Not so for the second model of poetic experience, which erases the distance between the poem and the reader and understands poetry quite literally *as* magnetic, a direct transfer of energy.<sup>482</sup>

What Rudy means by this is that, as opposed to a method of cognition and comprehension, the model that saw poetry as a ‘direct transfer of energy’ was more appealing to the Victorians with its ‘physical rendering of images with words’. This is of course like Seigworth and Gregg’s notion of affect. The effect achieved is physical, dynamic, and instantaneous and this is communicated by the language itself.

This viewpoint is further confirmed by Kirstie Blair who explains that metre was as a key component to poetry’s affectivity in the nineteenth century observing that ‘the more ‘perfect’ a poem, the more it will be exactly in harmony with the vital rhythms of the body.’<sup>483</sup> As has already been discussed in this chapter, the implication of Blair’s observation is that a ‘perfect’ poem is one that matches its metre to the rhythm of the heartbeat.

Blair suggests that metre can both soothe when regulated and aggravate when not. In ‘Caleb Cliff’, Harris makes extensive use of blank verse. It is not the intention of this thesis to ascertain that this extremely common metre is being used by Harris with the deliberate intention of promoting the calming power of regulated and virtuous behaviour

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<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>483</sup> Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*, p. 85.



through its rhythmic processes. However, when Harris's methods of composition are considered which involving composing work verbally, it is possible to speculate that there may be some agency here, whether conscious or unconscious. The audience meets the character of Caleb Cliff towards the end of the first part of the play. He is drunk and when he meets a traveller outside of the pub in which he has been drinking, he ignores the traveller's counsel towards abstinence. As Cliff has temporarily ceased drinking while talking to the traveller, he experiences the delirium tremens brought on by his alcoholism. This is communicated to the audience using the metrical form of blank verse:

*Drunken Man.* O Lord, have mercy on me! Round

my head

*[Here the drunken man labours under delirium tremens.*

Whirl fiery circles, and the moor is full :

Imps with long tongues are licking at my brow,

And snakes with wings of flame crawl up my breast ;

[...]

Like hissing cinders : wasps and water-flies

Scorch deep like melting mineral. Murther ! save !

What shall a sinner do ?<sup>484</sup>

Delirium tremens are experienced when withdrawing from alcohol. Therefore this blank verse section of the poem is actually symbolic: portraying Cliff's attempts at self-discipline and regaining some sense of manliness. Bailey et al. observe that virtuous behaviour must be habitual: 'temperance can only arise from habit and has to be practiced at all times for any person to maintain himself or herself in virtue.'<sup>485</sup> Here we begin to see Caleb Cliff's

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<sup>484</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 89.

<sup>485</sup> Adrian R. Bailey, David C. Harvey and Catherine Brace, p. 145.

acceptance of 'habit' due to the regulatory nature of his blank verse speech. This extract is also replete with the imagery of hell and damnation. The non-conforming metrical line, 'What shall a sinner do?' acknowledges Cliff's negation of the bodily control advocated by the religious dogma of the era but also juxtaposes with the previous use of blank verse to offer the possibility of redemption via the self-control that is represented by the metrical conformity of blank verse.

This progression into sobriety via the regulatory, or at least symbolic, power of blank verse is further reinforced in the second part of the play where Caleb Cliff exercises the masculine self-discipline that was expected of him in the Victorian era. This citation is from an abstinent Cliff in this part of the play where he is talking to a group of people about his relatively new state of sobriety:

Since I came here, a melancholy man,  
With grief enough upon my wretched self  
To cover o'er a mountain. Know you not  
That men look'd at me as a blazing ship,  
Rushing to ruin, hurried by the storm ?  
The great Disposer saved me. Though the masts  
And sails and spars flamed to the water's edge,  
Thank God, by one great effort I escaped,  
And leap'd upon the rock of temperance,  
And so was saved,—I who before was steep'd  
So deep in sin that I sank down below  
The strong-horn'd brute. And ask ye why, my friends ?<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 91.

There is a distinct contrast here between the emotive nature of Cliff's speech where he portrays himself on the point of death and the regulatory nature of the blank verse in which used by Harris. Harris's images are emotive, he describes Cliff as a 'blazing ship' with its commensurate notions of damnation that is 'rushing to ruin'. These are powerful emotions but Harris's use of blank verse shows us Cliff retains control and is able to recollect salient precepts. Relating this back to notions of affect, Elspeth Probyn reminds us that 'writing is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers.'<sup>487</sup> In Cliff's case, it is interesting to speculate as to whether the corporeal act of speech is working through his body hoping to get into the body of listeners, and potentially supporting them in adopting calm, temperate behaviour. Harris might have hoped that, via Cliff's speech to the dramatic fragment's audience, this calm and temperate behaviour would have got into their bodies too or at the very least the symbolism evident in the metrically regular verse would have communicated a sense of composure and orderliness.

Having used blank verse to either soothe or at least symbolise regulation, Harris takes the opposite position to reinforce the jarring and irregular nature of drunkenness. This serves as the opposite of the self-discipline required from the Victorian man. To achieve this level of discordance and to contrast with the regular nature of the self-disciplined and calm blank verse, Harris introduces song sections into the play that make use of catalectic trochaic tetrameter. From a symbolic point of view, the rhythm of these lines are inverted and with an incomplete foot. Sonically, they achieve the possible effect of an inverted and uneven heartbeat compared with the more regular iambic pentameter that had been used by Harris previously.

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<sup>487</sup> Elspeth Probyn, 'Writing Shame', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (London & Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 71-90 (p. 76).

Here I'll sit, and here I'll sing,  
Till the ancient rafters ring;  
Here I'll sit, and here I'll drink,  
Till the tallow candles wink.<sup>488</sup>

These lines might serve to physically jolt the listeners into the awareness that they are listening to a licentious and unregulated drunkard. Each line rhymes, and the stressed syllable that concludes each line reinforces the uncontrollable nature of the dipsomaniac and the emphasis he places on inappropriate behaviour. The words 'sing', 'ring', 'drink', and 'wink' all point to the centrality of Cliff's inappropriate conduct. Excessively loud singing, drinking, and sexual licentiousness are all alluded to with the stressed syllable, suggesting Cliff is dominated by these things and retains little ability for self-regulation. Jason R. Rudy comments that consuming poetry can lead to a direct physical shock on the reader: 'those genuinely affected by poetry experience emotional shocks that, in their disjunction from conscious thought, seem not unlike [...] electrical pulses.'<sup>489</sup> Rudy's notion of affectivity suggests that the audience might have been physically affected by Harris's shift in form which, could have created a shock commensurate with something like a 'jump scare' in modern horror cinema. Further to this, heptasyllabic lines were particularly suited to the kind of effects alluded to by Rudy. Tom Clayton confirms the emphatic nature of this metre:

Heptasyllabics have a unique and variously exploitable lilt, and they are perhaps the most sense-enforcing kind of verse: the lines are almost invariably regular and the stresses especially serviceable in forcing the sense(s) and emphases intended.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 84.

<sup>489</sup> Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*, p. 7.

<sup>490</sup> Tom Clayton, "'So quick bright things come to confusion'"; or, What Else Was A Midsummer Night's Dream About?', in *Shakespeare: Text and Theater, Essays in Honor of Jay L. Halio*, ed. by Lois Potter and Arthur F. Kinney (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 62-91 (p. 88).

The previous section of this chapter has explored the connotations of certain metrical schemes when conveying character, but Clayton confirms that the stresses in the metre are capable of achieving sense-enforcing qualities or affect. It is arguable that part of the sense-enforcing nature of heptasyllables is that they do not follow any balanced metrical scheme. This means they lack regularity which may reduce their lulling and calming qualities on the audience. Although, as has been stated, it is not possible to ascertain the exact levels of Harris's agency in his use of catalectic trochaic tetrameter to achieve impact on his audience, other poets in the nineteenth century were using dissonant and irregular metres to acknowledging the relationship between poetic composition and the body. This was referred to as Spasmodic poetry. Jason R. Rudy comments that 'reflecting its time, perhaps, Spasmodic poetry was noted for its violent meters, its egoistic disregard for community, and, according to Patmore, its "remote and involved thinking, abrupt and jerking mental movements"'.<sup>491</sup> The 'egoistic disregard for community' that Rudy identifies confirms that Harris does not conform with the conventions of this particular group as a poet *per se*. However, much of Rudy's description, such as 'remote and involved thinking', could equally be said to emphasise the remote selfishness of Caleb Cliff in the previous citation. Here, he expresses his intention to drink continuously implicitly showing both a remoteness and disregard for others by articulating his dominating urge to drink.

When Cliff utters the following speech, its selfish content is mirrored by its erratic use of form:

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<sup>491</sup> Jason R. Rudy, 'On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad', *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 590-96 (p. 590).

Fill the tankard to the top ;  
I will drain it every drop.  
This is life indeed for me,  
This is rarest jollity.<sup>492</sup>

This shows the discordant and dysregulated state Cliff has entered into where his self-discipline or control is entirely absent. The lack of manliness and self-control contained in these lines of catalectic trochaic tetrameter bear some close examination in the context of Kirstie Blair's comments on the relationship between Spasmodic poetry, its poetic heroes and their relationship to gender:

[Spasmodic] poems defiantly present spasms as a key feature of the natural world, as instances of physical or spiritual connection to wider forces, and as a constituent part of poetic form and rhythm. They also introduce a new kind of poetic hero, who is indeed nervous, emotional, and prone to spasmodic attacks, and thus definitely lacks key attributes of mid-Victorian manliness.<sup>493</sup>

The fact that this speech is trochaic with a catalectic ending gives it an arrhythmic discordant quality. The unfinished and digressive nature of a drunkard's speech is reinforced by the incomplete metre. Harris's use of metrical form to communicate Cliff's loss of masculine self-discipline is deployed skilfully in this section of 'Caleb Cliff'. It is interesting to connect Blair's idea of the 'nervous, emotional' hero who is 'prone to spasmodic attacks' with Harris's portrayal of Cliff. Although not presented as any kind of hero in the first instance, the effects achieved by Harris do bear comparison with some of the intentions of Spasmodic poetry. Harris's use of blank verse shows the regulatory power

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<sup>492</sup> Harris, *Luda: A Lay of the Druids. Hymns, Tales, Essays and Legends*, p. 84.

<sup>493</sup> Kirstie Blair, 'Spasmodic Affections: Poetry, Pathology, and the Spasmodic Hero', *Victorian Poetry*, 42 (2004), 473-490 (p. 474).

of even cadences and reinforces Cliff's reasoning, reflective, and disciplined conduct to his audience. Potentially imitative or symbolic of the heartbeat, this use of metre calms and soothes his audience by kinetically transferring or representing the calming benefits of self-regulation. When Harris wishes to convey the jarring, uncomfortable, and discordant nature of the dysregulated aspects of drunkenness so at odds with the masculine ideals of the era, he shifts to a catalectic trochaic tetrameter which inverts the calming and soothing heartbeat sound of iambs in his previous use of blank verse. The lack of discipline is further emphasised by this use of catalexis. Caleb is the sot whose mind wanders and the close of every sentence is malformed to emphasise his egregious selfishness.

### Conclusion

This chapter argues that, from a formal perspective, Harris is a poet who is both accomplished and idiosyncratic. The lack of critical attention he has been afforded by many literary critics due to the imitative nature of his use of form is both specious and misleading. This critical viewpoint fails to take into account the hybrid discourse created by labouring-class poets by adopting the established literary forms of their social superiors. Harris's appropriation of these forms to suit his own context is evident in both his facility with them and his use of them to further his own poetic goals. In an era of metrical exploration and innovation, Harris is more than the equivalent of his peers in terms of his creativity and adaptation of form. His use of the connotations of metrical forms such as blank verse and trochaic tetrameter to reinforce characterisation are evident in his dramatic fragment 'Caleb Cliff' where he uses the metrical scheme of trochaic tetrameter to symbolise the demonic qualities of drunkenness and blank verse to emphasise the reflective behaviour expected from a reasoning and abstinent Christian man. Harris is also able to take this further. By utilising the Victorian era's belief in the kinetic and affect based nature of poetry and its power to influence, he also produces work that achieves its

intended effects on a somatic level far beyond the cerebral. Through a skilful deployment of a range of metrical schemes Harris is able to directly influence and instruct his intended audience about the Victorian era's notions of masculinity. His manipulation of the rhythmic and arrhythmic processes of the heartbeat directly emphasises the importance of self-discipline to its intended audience as well as the perils of living without it.

This chapter has established that in an era where metrical exploration was rife, Harris's use of form was both masterful and apposite. His use of the affectivity of metre to reinforce his message of abstinence shows that he had the literary abilities to affect the changes he so wished to inculcate in his readership.



## Conclusion

This thesis has established that John Harris has been unduly critically neglected after his death and that he is a poet worthy of critical recognition. There are several separate factors that have contributed towards the dismissal of his work, but it is also possible to identify overarching trends in the critical treatment of labouring-class poetics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that have not been to Harris's advantage.

Harris's decline in critical relevance occurs sharply after his death which occurred 21 years before the end of the Victorian era. Harris's primary appeal to his mentors and sponsors was that his existence as a poet and the themes of his corpus confirmed they were living in a progressive era. The fact that Harris was a labouring-class man who triumphed over great personal hardships to achieve material success helped to reinforce the dominant Victorian ideology that success comes to those who help themselves. This ideology was of great benefit to this era's newly made middle classes: industrialists and businessmen who were able to profit from exploiting large swathes of uncomplaining workforces to maximise their profits. It also implicitly supported a view that this exploitation only happened to those who were fit for no other purpose. People like Harris proved a degree of mobility was possible for those with ability. For late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary critics, labouring-class poets were both a curiosity and confirmation that they were living in an enlightened, liberal society where even people on the lowest rung of society were literate and had the ability to appreciate, and at times pay tribute to, the literary taste created by their social superiors. However, the dynamic between the notions of literature created by the middle classes and the work produced by the labouring classes became shaped by the social and economic relationships between them. This meant that labouring-class people writing in the style of established literary fashion were perceived as

subservient and imitative in these matters as opposed to adapting to established conventions and styles.

The thesis has shown that the renewed focus on the field of labouring-class poetics in the 1970s onwards did not really evolve from the ideological stances of the majority of nineteenth-century critics. Critics like Martha Vicinus started to sift labouring-class poetics according to a left-wing middle-class ideology of reactionary rebellion. This investigation was limited to poets who challenged the dominant political ideologies of the Victorian establishment or committed the smaller but still political act of writing in labouring-class dialect. I have argued that what limits Vicinus's approach is that, as an academic, she is part of the literary establishment. Her presumption that the only rational response to the economic and social repression of an exploited labouring-class writer is either outright rebellion or identity politics suggests a lack of empathy with the situation of the average nineteenth-century labouring-class poet. This leads her to ignore vast swaths of labouring-class writing that was imitative of established middle-class literary taste as indicative of slavish and futile attempts at social mobility which were doomed to irrelevancy. This is because they do not meet her criteria for dissonance and/or innovation. I have argued that Vicinus's approach is essentially the same as that of her nineteenth-century counterparts. She does not believe that a labouring-class writer who uses established literary forms is noteworthy as they did not originate with him or her in their respective class. This does not take into account the possibility that, as Harris has evidenced in this thesis, some of these poems could be extremely dexterous and at times innovative with established literary forms. It also seems to fail to take into account the fact that poets like Byron reappropriated forms like the ottava rima and were not accused of being imitative by literary critics due to their class status.

This thesis then discussed how the dominance of middle-class literary aesthetics recurs with D.M. Thomas's attempts at re-evaluating Harris in the late 1970s. His appraisal of Harris as a labouring-class poet suggests that he was in need of an editor as his poetry is too long, iterative and dogmatic. This is not a view shared by any contemporaneous criticism of Harris in the nineteenth century as the length of his work conformed with his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary influences. Even Sabine-Baring Gould, who critically savages Harris's writing in the early twentieth century, takes umbrage at Harris's style of writing rather than its length. Thomas believes that, as a contemporary poet, he has the requisite critical skills to represent Harris's best work. Without acknowledging that he is informed by modernism, Thomas embodies an imagist approach to Harris isolating small sections of his corpus or highly musical lines to present him as a poet of rare skill but who lacked the judgement to see where he might best have reined himself in. Thomas's approach operates in a paradox where the things that made Harris's worthy of publication in his lifetime are now his primary weakness. However, I have argued that Thomas's identification of Harris's blending of both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century influences is apposite and yields one of the key threads that had heretofore been ignored: Harris in many ways is an idiosyncratic poet.

The greater emphasis on inclusivity and evaluation of labouring-class poetics that has dominated the first half of the twenty-first century is welcome when investigating Harris's critical value to the modern day reader. Although John Goodridge's online database is fundamentally a democratic and inclusive creation, it does bring questions of value to the fore. Its complete lack of hierarchisation is welcome inasmuch as it does not exclude any labouring-class poets including Harris. However, it is common sense to suggest when researching such a huge volume of writers some methods of identifying salient or unusual qualities might support a more methodical and structured level of investigation without exclusion. Harris's extraordinary level of publication does not identify him as a poet who

is more or less superior to someone who may have remained unpublished in his lifetime like Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889). However, it does suggest that there is something in this level of publication that might bear investigation. In the case of some of Harris’s predecessors like Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823) a level of popularity has identified as sufficient reason for critical investigation. This is evidenced by both his inclusion in a chapter by John Goodridge in *Class and the Canon* where he comments that Bloomfield’s ‘first and most famous poem, *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800), is a far less blandly reassuring depiction of rural life than almost any critic has observed’.<sup>494</sup> For Harris this criterion of popularity does not appear to be a reason for giving him extensive critical attention. His winning of the Shakespeare tercentenary prize is ignored and his extensive publishing history is given cursory treatment by Keegan and Goodridge in 2013. Little evaluation is offered of his formal capabilities.<sup>495</sup>

This prevailing academic trend of inclusivity is key to placing Harris as a poet of interest, ability, and relevance. The question now is in this more democratic field of labouring-class poetics what defines Harris as worthy of investigation? The openness of the field has facilitated an opportunity to evaluate Harris on his own terms. However, this process does not hinder a systematic exploration of the previously used criteria for evaluating labouring-class poetics. This facilitates a two-pronged approach: to explore Harris as a poet on his own terms but also to evaluate whether his previous critical neglect was justified in any context. According to the prevailing academic trends of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Harris’s idiosyncrasy should have made him an object of critical study in the latter half of the twentieth century. Maidment’s definition of ‘Parnassian’ poets who transcend historical discourse is certainly matched by Harris’s intentions if not

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<sup>494</sup> John Goodridge, ‘Sociable or Solitary? John Clare, Robert Bloomfield, Community and Isolation’, in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750–1900*, ed. by Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 55–76 (p. 65).

<sup>495</sup> Keegan and Goodridge.

his material influence.<sup>496</sup> The impact of the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century on Harris's intentions and aims reach their apotheosis in Harris's expressed intentions in both *The Cruise of the Cutter* (1872) and *Two Giants* (1878). These are world peace and advocacy of temperance. If Harris had achieved the level of critical attention or publication figures of a Byron or Tennyson, it is impossible to speculate as to what level of influence he might have achieved. As critics have historically focused their attentions on labouring-class poets who expressed their ideas in such marginalised ways that they were never going to gain traction in society at large, one wonders how supportive middle-class literary critics would have been of a genuine literary negation from these kinds of writers if it had actually occurred. It is helpful to retrospectively apply the political notion of the 'Overton Window' to Harris's politics.<sup>497</sup> This paradigm suggests that only minor level change is possible from the ruling political establishment who are in essence a reflection of public taste. When one considers the desire for humanitarianism underneath Harris's surface level of conformity, Chartist poets appear more as poseurs than politicians. Harris appears have a genuine desire to enact small, but positive change for humanity despite his non-political exterior. However, Harris's corpus is also given too little credit for its small 'p' politics where Harris celebrates and humanises labouring-class men who died nobly to save their colleagues in poems such as 'Christian Heroism' where a miner sacrifices his own life to save another.<sup>498</sup> Many miners were viewed as sub-human by their employers and the popular media and Harris's depictions do much to challenge these stereotypes and the established views of his social superiors. The obvious criticism from a more privileged academic perspective is that Harris should have done more and castigated those who placed him and his colleagues in such a terrible position. Again, this does not take into account that much of Harris's corpus offers unflinching perspectives of poverty. In the

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<sup>496</sup> Maidment, 'Introduction', p. 15.

<sup>497</sup> 'The Overton Window', *Mackinac Center for Public Policy* (2019) <<https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>> [accessed 20 December 2023]

<sup>498</sup> Harris, *Lays from the Mine, the Moor, and the Mountain*, pp. 33-45.

autobiographical sections of *A Story of Carn Brea* (1863) and in *My Autobiography* (1882) Harris offers clear and concise descriptions of his privations. Just because these are not accompanied by biting or emotive commentary does not deprive them of the implicit political nature of their existence or suggest that Harris is without political sentiment.

Harris's response to the organic, natural world is quintessentially Romantic. He rhapsodises over flora and fauna as a celebration of God's omnipotence and splendour throughout his corpus. Juxtaposed with this, he also uses literary conventions that were most popular in the eighteenth-century, such as the loco-descriptive poem. The unlikeliness of hybridising the highly formal qualities of the Neo-Classical movement with the sentiments of the reactionary Romanticism which succeeded it reach a synthesis in Harris's work which is markedly original. Despite this, Harris's love of nature is out of step with the era in which he lived where the Victorians' distance from the natural world caused them to view it with suspicion. Ideologically, Harris is a Romantic, rendering the huge impact that industrialism had on the Cornish landscape in fabulist terms and minimising its actual impact on the environment. Harris preferred to paint Cornwall as an Edenic paradise that represented the apotheosis of God than accurately render the experience of the industrial wasteland experienced by many of its people.

I have argued that if Harris's corpus is idiosyncratic in his confident adoption of disparate elements for politicised purposes and its desire for influence, it is also formally accomplished and innovative. Harris was writing in an era where metrical experimentation was rife and where matters of versification were in constant debate between critics. The nineteenth century was an era where the parameters of metrical form were pushed rather than being disregarded. Harris's agency with form is established by several sources.

Literary reviewers, Harris's son, the schoolteacher John Howard Harris and D.M. Thomas also point to Harris's ability with form. Thomas in particular identifies Harris's musicality

as a strength suggesting that this is a further mark of his formal dexterity. I have argued that evidence of this can be found in Harris's play 'Bulo' which makes effective use of the syllabic stresses contained in blank verse to achieve a kind of affectivity on the readers' understanding.<sup>499</sup> Furthermore, Harris's autobiographical poem, 'Monro' shows assured use of Spenserian stanzas to create a concrete experience of the natural world at Monro's birth.<sup>500</sup>

This level of accomplishment, impressive in itself, was also Harris's gateway to social mobility and influence beyond his straitened labouring-class origins. As has been previously established, 1852 saw Matthew Arnold arguing that literature was a central way for the labouring classes to gain an understanding of sympathy with their social superiors.<sup>501</sup> By writing using established literary conventions, Harris allowed himself the possibility of gaining a degree of literary influence and the potential to instruct his fellow man in line with his Romantic ideologies. His formal abilities made him creditable. Kirstie Blair has established the Victorian era's emerging association between metre and physical felt connection. Harris combined his desire to influence with formal dexterity. This allowed him credibility with the uses of metre to promote deliberate somatic effects on his readership. This allowed him to promote his politics to an audience with the deliberate intention of influencing them. Harris's dramatic fragment 'Caleb Cliff' is an example of Harris using a composite of metrical schemes to physically reinforce the audience's understanding. His use of iambic pentameter in this fragment offers the reader the assuring, consistent, and regulatory pulse of the heartbeat while his use of heptasyllabic lines jars the reader into understanding and fearing the dysregulated nature of alcohol abuse. Harris's attempts to maintain the physical health of his peers and highlight the pitfalls of alcoholism to them, was essentially a political act in support of the labouring-classes. It is worth

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<sup>499</sup> Harris, *Bulo; Reuben Ross; A Tale of the Manacles; Hymn, Song, and Story*, p. 4.

<sup>500</sup> Harris, *Monro*, p. 2.

<sup>501</sup> Arnold, *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882*, pp. 19-20.

considering that, at this point in Harris's career, he was essentially no longer as disadvantaged as he had been previously. No longer working as a miner and now a Bible Reader and friends with local MPs and gentry like the Fox family, Harris had become socially mobile yet he still used his poetical skill and influence for political purposes. None of these shy away from representing his experiences of labouring-class life.

It is the social mobility which Harris managed to achieve through his writing which is a key to understanding the lack of critical engagement with his work. This mobility also highlights ways forward for the studying of labouring-class poetics. This thesis has suggested that, to a certain extent, the notion of labouring-class poetics is a false dichotomy if the critic's purpose is to establish literary merit. It would seem that the notion of being noteworthy or literary is caught in a double bind. As it stands at the moment, literary merit has either been defined by the production of work by middle-class authors who have defined literary taste and have been celebrated by critics who occupy a similar position of privilege as being indicative of all that merits the title of Literature. If literary critics and academics are operating from the perspective that the notion of literary merit is commensurate with the educational, economic, and other sundry advantages that mark a privileged upbringing, everything else is by default a curiosity that exists in opposition to, or at least alongside, this established notion of what constitutes good writing. Vicinus's approach of suggesting that work that embodies revolutionary or political sentiments or captures class identity in its rhythms of speech is understandable as it defines a genre of writing in opposition to the notions of the literary establishment. The limitations of this approach are that it is still an educated critic retrospectively applying criteria to a vast body of work informed by their own perspective and values. Similarly, as much as the work of John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan has opened up a discourse where labouring-class poets are viewed as poets *per se* is welcome, it also leads to the opposing issue: if every poet is worthy of investigation on their own terms, whom do we consider more formally or



thematically innovative than another if we cannot compare them in some fashion? Taken to an extreme, this approach yields the notion that any poet is worthy of investigation and that school and university curriculums could be founded on a lottery system of known writers or perhaps simply be restricted to teachers' research interests or personal preferences.

Taken from either perspective, Harris has been unfairly critically ignored. The sheer volume of poets writing in the nineteenth century meant he was simply not recognised. The fact that his politics were more nuanced than the brash unionism of some of his contemporaries made him easy to dismiss. His desire to make use of the established literary conventions of the time meant that for many critics, he was simply using poetry as a tool for social mobility. They did not seem to consider what he might do with this social mobility when he achieved it. What Harris chose to do was actually supportive of his fellow working man. His challenging of the needless sacrifice of many men (often from poorer backgrounds) to government dictated acts of war and encouragement of abstinence amongst the labouring classes were humane and political acts. Critics have not invested sufficient time in understanding Harris as the formally accomplished and innovative poet he really was.

In many ways, this thesis leaves more questions than it has provided answers. The question of Harris's relevance has now been established according to the full range of extant critical frameworks. However, this now intertwines with the comparatively recent opening of the field which means more poets like Harris can be shorn of the expectations of the label of 'labouring-class' and be evaluated on their own terms. Maybe instead of being referred to as labouring-class poets, we can move towards poets of a labouring-class background because this is not the root cause of their relevance as writers. Hopefully, in a not-too-distant future the only necessary sobriquet will be 'poet of the nineteenth-century'. When referring to the work of Harris and his potentially as yet ignored contemporaries, D.M.

Thomas comments that ‘one can never be quite sure that a mine has been worked out.’<sup>502</sup>

Thomas is alluding to a Cornish context but as more and more poets from a labouring-class background are elevated from obscurity, I hope that the implicit politics, thematic and formal idiosyncrasies in their work will be considered on their own terms.

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<sup>502</sup> *The Granite Kingdom*, ed. by D.M. Thomas, p. 15.

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