

The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain.

Aruna Krishnamurthy, ed. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009. 257pp.

ISBN 978-0-7546-6504-5

The development of the British working class in the wake of the Industrial Revolution was not only the evolution of a new demographic, but also the emergence of that demographic as a class-conscious movement. The voices of the working class, which spoke from both within and without the movement, argued for a more complicated view of the labourer than the traditional georgic paean: the patrons of this new consciousness argued that the working class need not be condemned to a virtuous and ignorant suffering, and proposed salvation in art, pride, satire, or even revolution. At the same time, the old notion of the “man of letters” came to be replaced by the “intellectual” - here defined in Gramscian terms as a social critic and persuader (11). Aruna Krishnamurthy has collected a series of essays in *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* that intelligently probe these questions of authenticity and identity among artists of the time, quoting R. Radhakrishnan to propose a central question: “Where will they speak from: rupturally from within the hegemonic body, or from a position ‘without?’” (17)

Krishnamurthy’s introduction admirably establishes a framework, as she lays out a rough history of the development of the working-class intellectual, beginning with the “labouring poets” tradition that arrived with Stephen Duck’s *The Thresher’s Labour* (1730) before continuing with the popular political movements, such as the London Corresponding Society and the Chartists, that gave voice to working-class woes. Finally, Krishnamurthy delineates the movement’s maturity in artists who mixed middle-class ascendancy with working-class values, such as Alexander Somerville, Michael Faraday, and music-hall entertainers, such as Marie Lloyd, who “played at poverty.” But while Krishnamurthy ably maps a hundred-year evolution of the working-class intellectual from artisan-artists to a movement of deliberately counter-hegemonic radicals, this theoretical framework only plays a strong role in the essays of Richard Salmon, Ian Peddie, and Krishnamurthy herself.

The first three chapters respectively address Stephen Duck, Bristol poet Ann Yearsley, and Robert Burns as early examples of working-class intellectuals. William J. Christmas’s excellent discussion of Duck, “From threshing Corn, he turns to thresh his Brains,” draws its title from a biting epigram by Swift that began a series of contemporary satires of Duck, mocking the poet as he educated himself and began to write conventional imitations of Horace (31). Christmas defends Duck against these contemporary judgments and many current ones, which link the poet’s increasing education with a declining level of artistry, with close readings of Duck’s later work, uncovering the difficult path he walked between the roles of thresher and poet. Following this essay, Monica Smith Hart challenges the current focus of research on Yearsley, directing our attentions away from the influence of Hannah More on Yearsley’s first work, *Poems on Several Occasions*, and toward the poems’ implicit criticisms of the educational system, canonical literature, and religion. Likewise, Luke R.J. Maynard’s essay on Robert Burns interrogates a static image of the poet as a champion of the

working class, incorporating Hélène Cixous's theories of *bisexuallisme* (73) to argue for a more fluid understanding of the "Heaven-taught ploughman" persona, pointing to the early poem "To a Mouse" as evidence of class hybridity.

Krishnamurthy moves the argument from these artisan-artists to the institutionalization of working-class intellectualism. Her "Coffeehouse vs. Alehouse: Notes on the Making of the Eighteenth-Century Working-Class Intellectual" locates the London Corresponding Society, in the person of prominent leader and writer John Thelwall, as a body of transition between the early failings of "untutored" crowds and principle-driven movements for the enlightenment of the working class (93). Likewise, Rob Breton discusses what he sees as a deliberate move by Chartist intellectuals to adopt the melodrama of "sensational" working-class serial fictions as a way of identifying themselves with the class they wished to empower (109), arguing that "the instruments of romance do not need to be contrary to the aims of history" (123). A different sort of appropriation is discussed in Kathryn Prince's examination of the ways in which working-class reformers such as William Cobbett and Thomas Wooler rehabilitated an elite conservative idea of Shakespeare into a part of the common man's culture, finding hints of radical reform in the Bard's work. In turn, Sambudha Sen traces the manner in which the "radical expression" of confrontational satirists such as Cobbett laid groundwork that would later allow the magazine *Punch* under Douglas Jerrold to cultivate respectability, voicing sarcastic and coded protest without offending an increasingly middle-class readership. Sen effectively argues that Jerrold's essays were significant "not so much in their continuing ability to sustain radical movements, as in their role in redistributing radical expressive energies within the many popular forms" (151). Sen finds a similar process at work in Dicken's novels, particularly *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, as he has previously argued in 1998's *Bleak House and Little Dorrit: The Radical Heritage.*"

Richard Salmon's excellent essay on Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* examines the manner in which Kingsley, a middle-class writer, created his fictive autobiography of a working-class poet — "a middle-class simulation of a working-class imitation of a middle-class form" (184). Salmon argues that Kingsley based his story on the widely-accepted archetype of the peasant poet, rendered in the terms employed by Carlyle for his tales of quiet intellectual heroism. Salmon is especially persuasive as he identifies in the image of Burns, described by Carlyle as one of his "Hero as Man of Letters" (175), as the head and chief archetype of the class-conscious movement of working-class intellectuals used by Kingsley as a template. Julie F. Codell continues in this vein, thoughtfully considering Alexander Somerville's recreation of himself as he tried to meet and unify the conflicting needs of leadership, agitation, and journalism. In turn, Alice Jenkins extends her 2009 publication of the "mental exercises" of Michael Faraday's club for self-improvement, examining the elaborate measures taken by this group to maintain civility by eschewing politics and mimicking a classics-inspired rhetorical distance. Jenkins suggests this solicitude poses a challenge for contemporary personal and political approaches to artisan texts. And lastly, Ian Peddie identifies a shift in the popular music-hall productions away from agitation and towards a collaborative reinforcement of the conservative class system, where working-class aspirations of social change or self-

advancement became a clownish subject of scorn.

Krishnamurthy's volume spans a wide range of topics as it traces aspects of the development and institutionalization of working-class intellectuals. It is well worth the time of scholars of working-class literature, particularly those looking for new theoretical approaches.

Alexander Davis