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'Gooin t' schoo': The Subject of Adult Education in Dialect Poetry from the Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861–65

Simon Rennie

'The Beddin's Goan', published in the *Blackburn Times* in November 1862 by W. A. Abram, begins with the lines 'EH! Robbut! th' lan'lord's bin tu-day, | Whol tha wor deawn at th'class', encapsulating links between unemployment, poverty, and education which became apparent to industrial workers during the Lancashire Cotton Famine. Examining poems from the Cotton Famine poetry database, this article considers how adult education and cultures of literacy are addressed in dialect poetry during the crisis. It finds that, in contrast to standard English poetry on the subject, dialect poetry displays inherent irony in its linguistic tensions, and is often more explicitly class conscious and socially resistant. Aspects of double address allow for more complex commentaries on programmes of social improvement, as do the greater variety of poetic voices. Dialect poems discussed address advances in education and literacy precipitated by measures to counter social degradation during the crisis, but which contributed to the suppression of distinctive working-class cultures. As a self-conscious literary form reliant on the perception of working-class authenticity, dialect poetry of the Cotton Famine offers examples of decay and resistance which represent an intriguing window into a little studied but historically significant period of working-class British culture.

In his study of 1950s northern English working-class consumption of mass media, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Richard Hoggart devoted his first chapter to defining the phrase 'working class', noting that in the mid-twentieth century 'it is often said [...] that already most of us inhabit an almost flat plain, the plain of the lower middle- to middle-classes'.[1] In the twenty-first century the perception of cultural homogeneity and recognition of other identifying factors in Britain has led to a degree of political, and indeed academic, erasure of the concept of class as a defining characteristic. In this light Hoggart's attempts might seem to represent the beginning of the end of a particular way of identifying a social group. It may concomitantly be felt that surer definitive ground would be found studying the cultural responses of northern English working-class people of the mid-nineteenth century, when the vast cotton industry had provided work for hundreds of thousands, and so many towns in Lancashire defined themselves in relation to the commodity's production. However, during the American Civil War of 1861–65 the Union blockade against Confederate exports of raw cotton starved this geographically small but industrially crucial British region. The cultural response to this disruption of a long-standing economic model was more complex than might first be supposed, and it included implicit critiques of contemporary class identification.[2] Certainly, Cotton Famine poetry, studied as a discrete literary phenomenon, can be seen to bemoan the circumstances of poverty, rail against the international causes of the crisis, and call for more efficient financial assistance.[3] But it also reveals social resistance to the homogenizing changes effected by economic circumstances, often rooted in an essentialist valorization of the domestic and the local. Indeed, Hoggart's book argued that, almost a century later, though Britain might be heading towards a kind of 'classless' society, the rate of change was slower than initially perceived:

> The more we look at working-class life, the more we try to reach the core of working-class attitudes, the more surely does it appear that the core is a sense of the personal, the concrete, the local: it is embedded in the idea of, first, the family and, second, the neighbourhood. This remains, though much works against it, and partly because so much works against it. (p. 33)

Quoting peculiarly northern working-class idioms he overhears in a waiting room, Hoggart uses language to argue his point in relation to the retention of social identity. This article examines similar cultural resistance and questions of class identity in the

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[1] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (Penguin, 1958), p. 13.

[2] I use the phrase 'working-class' as a descriptor here rather than the perhaps more accurate 'labouring-class' in alignment with the mid-twentieth-century examination of class of which Hoggart was an important part.

[3] Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5) <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/> [accessed 23 January 2025].

forebears of Hoggart's subjects, specifically found in Lancashire dialect poems which address the subject of adult education during the Lancashire Cotton Famine. They address programmes developed during the crisis to occupy unemployed workers, often as a necessary requirement in order to qualify for aid. Moreover, this study finds that Hoggart's identification of the cultural prevalence of 'the personal, the concrete, [and] the local' aligns with the topics of much Lancashire dialect poetry as a specific literary mode. 'The local' requires no explanation, but the dialect poetry of this region generally eschews religious, philosophical abstractions and is often distinctly material in its concerns. However, it should be recognized that it is only in dialect poetry where this emphasis on the concrete is so prevalent. In standard English poetry, Victorian working-class writers were as prone to abstraction as their middle-class equivalents. Dialect poetry's self-conscious 'working classness' embraces the material. In relation to the 'personal' element of Hoggart's triumvirate of working-class cultural characteristics, dialect poetry's linguistic foregrounding of a particular idiolect requires the adoption of a character as the speaker who often relates individual attitudes, even if these may appear to represent the collective.[4] It might also be noted that even Hoggart's critique of the 'Americanization' of British culture in the mid-nineteenth century finds its analogy in the literary response to the transatlantic cause of Lancashire's 1860s woes.[5]

Dialect poetry from the Lancashire Cotton Famine on the subject of adult education is significant because it occurs at a crucial point in British literary and political history. As it reflects the local social consequences of a global crisis, Lancashire dialect poetry reaches its textual apotheosis alongside a set of circumstances, including changes to educational practice, which cause a dilution of Lancastrian working-class distinctiveness.[6] Brian Hollingworth's 1977 anthology of Victorian Lancashire dialect poetry, *Songs of the People*, is unique in that it represents the only published collection of Cotton Famine poems in the twentieth century (situated in one chapter titled 'The Cotton Panic'), even though the literary phenomenon had been recognized by contemporary observers.[7] In the introduction to his anthology, Hollingworth observes

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[4] Dialect poems are often read more productively as reflecting individual modes of speech than representing a generic regional verbal culture. No two dialect poets utilize the same orthography, for instance, and characters vary in the obscurity of their language use.

[5] For more on Lancastrian literary responses to the American Civil War, see Simon Rennie, 'This "Merikay War": Poetic Responses in Lancashire to the American Civil War', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25.1 (2020), pp. 126–43, doi:10.1093/jvcult/vcz024.

[6] For further information on the literary contexts of Lancashire Cotton Famine poetry generally, see Rennie, 'This "Merikay War"'.

[7] In a review of Joseph Ramsbottom's 1864 collection of dialect poems, *The Examiner* noted that 'a remarkable feature in this Lancashire cotton famine is the fact that it has left a memorial in many Lancashire songs, printed and diffused in broadsheets or collected into volumes'. Review of Joseph Ramsbottom, *Phases of Distress: Lancashire Rhymes* (1864), *Examiner*, 13 August 1864, p. 520.

that 'increasing standards of literacy encouraged dialect poetry during the "golden age" of the late '50s and '60s' but also contributed to its decline as a distinctive literary form. He observes that 'the new written [dialect] poetry adequately represented the thoughts and feelings of the people as the poetry of the oral tradition had done. But, increasingly, higher standards of education threatened this harmony.'[8] For Hollingworth, subsequent examples of dialect poetry in the region after the 1860s too often become exercises in parody or nostalgia. The window for the cultural production where we might hear the phonetic rendering of the real speech of ordinary people, albeit filtered through individual perception and literary praxis, is historically narrow. This article, then, is an examination of Lancashire dialect poetry considering the engine of its own demise. A literary form which is performative, self-conscious, and deeply rooted in class culture confronts the reality of an emergent mass literacy which will contribute to the standardization of speech patterns and weaken regional cultural identity. Except, as Hoggart observed in relation to the 1950s, change is gradual. In reality, many of the regionally exclusive dialect terms which make Victorian Lancashire dialect poetry opaque to other anglophones are still familiar in the region in the twenty-first century. And the skill with which these nineteenth-century poems were written means that they come aurally alive when recited by competent modern performers who already speak with Lancashire accents. It is worth recognizing that dialect poetry of any type, whatever its subject, is also always about language.

Although Lancashire dialect poetry as a literary tradition can be traced back to eighteenth-century printed ballads, its national popularity really began in 1856 with the publication of Edwin Waugh's 'Come Whoam to thi Childer an' Me'. The son of a Rochdale shoemaker, Waugh (1817–1890) was originally a printer who became an administrator and then a journalist and writer. His 1867 *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk during the Cotton Famine* is considered the most influential journalistic account of the social effects of the crisis, and it concludes with a chapter of dialect poems on the subject by different Lancashire writers.[9] The journalistic articles which comprise the bulk of the book had mostly been written for the *Manchester Examiner* during the crisis, and it was the 1856 publication of 'Come Whoam' in that newspaper over a decade before which had greatly enhanced Waugh's literary career. The poem became so popular that it was printed on cards, and the wealthy philanthropist Baroness Burdett-Coutts ordered and distributed twenty thousand of them. The poem was eventually set to music and

[8] *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution*, ed. by Brian Hollingworth (Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 5.

[9] Edwin Waugh, *Home-Life of the Lancashire Factory Folk during the Cotton Famine* (Heywood, 1867) <https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/waugh/b_cotton_famine.htm> [accessed 23 January 2025].

Waugh became a nationally known figure, corresponding with Disraeli and other literary figures of the day. Inevitably, he was known as the 'Lancashire Burns' and his poetry was seen to bring a particularly authentic focus on the social and moral health of the northern English working classes which was such a preoccupation of the period's swathe of 'condition of England' novels. Written during a period of relative prosperity for many of the industrial working classes in the north of England, the poem consists of a conversation between husband and wife, with the latter being the first speaker, pleading with her husband to return from drinking in a public house and spend time with his family. Eventually, the husband agrees to return, after justifying his leisure time and declaring his love for his family. The first stanza, however, suggests that the conversation takes place in the pub, placing the wife in a potentially humiliating social position, pleading her case in the presence of her husband's fellow drinkers:

> Aw've just mended th' fire wi' a cob;
> Owd Swaddle has brought thi new shoon;
> There's some nice bacon collops o'th hob,
> An' a quart o' ale-posset i'th oon;
> Aw've brought thi top cwot, doesto know,
> For th' rain's comin' deawn very dree;
> An' th' har'sto'e's as white as new snow;
> Come whoam to thi childer an' me.[10]

The poem does not touch on the subject of education, but in its presentation of familial gender roles, tension between the domestic and the public, and the moral choices of working people, the work precipitates many of the topics that become prevalent in the Lancashire dialect poetry of the Cotton Famine. Above all, the metropolitan reception of the dense dialect orthography and obscure dialect terms boosted the regional publication of dialect poetry in the 1860s, priming the national appreciation of the dialect response to the Cotton Famine. It is largely down to the familiarity of Waugh's poem that Lancashire dialect poetry was published and affectionately parodied in *Punch* during the Cotton Famine to encourage charitable donations for relief of the afflicted. Outside of the region, philologists were fascinated by the Lancashire dialect retention of Old Norse words (*gradely*, *threopin*) and other verbal anomalies, but linguistically minded amateurs also simply enjoyed poring over dialect poems to work out their meaning.

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[10] Edwin Waugh, 'Come Whoam to thi' Childer an' Me', in Waugh, *Poems and Songs*, ed. by George Milner (Heywood, 1885), pp. 121–24 (p. 121).

One of the dialect poems which Brian Hollingworth collected on the subject of adult education from the Cotton Famine period is 'Eawr Factory Skoo' by E. Moss, whom Hollingworth identifies as Elijah Moss.[11] The concept of a 'factory school' arose because the extent of educational programmes by the middle of the Cotton Famine meant that emergency schools were set up in church halls and idle cotton mills. In his history of the famine, *The Hungry Mills*, Norman Longmate refers to the 'Lancashire experiment' in education provision during the period, and gives an indication of its scale in the region:

> In the peak month for education, March 1863, a total of 132,000 men, women and children were receiving systematic teaching of some kind, more than 20,000 of them being adult males. Nearly 17,000 were boys under the age of fifteen, and 41,000 women and girls of various ages, learning the domestic arts, mainly sewing, while another 54,000 children were attending ordinary schools at the relief committees' expense.[12]

But just as adults were coerced into educational programmes in order to qualify for relief in many parishes, Longmate notes that

> some relief committees also made it a condition of granting relief to a family that the children were sent to school, a novel, even disagreeable idea for parents who had hitherto been content to ignore their offspring's education until they became 'half-timers' at the mill. (p. 175)

On first reading Moss's poem appears to specifically celebrate the adult educational programmes which were introduced during the crisis, but as so often with dialect poetry which comments on social issues, the discrepancy between the language used and the topic discussed reveals attitudinal slippage:

> Ther never wur such times as these, naw, nee'r sin th' world wur made,
> Ther's nowt but gents un ladies neaw, ut's work'd i' th' cotton trade,
> For harder toimes wur never felt, that's weel known to be true,
> Un th' hardest wark we han just neaw, is gooin to th' Factory Skoo.
>
> Chorus
> We're ladies neaw un gentlemen,
> Un paid for gooin Skoo.

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[11] E. Moss, 'Eawr Factory Skoo', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, pp. 108–09.

[12] Norman Longmate, *The Hungry Mills: The Story of the Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861–5* (Temple Smith, 1978), p. 175.

Six heawrs a day we han th' be there, furt make us o moor wise,
One heawr ther is for reedin, un one heawr for exercise,
For sodiers soon we shall o be, bekose we'n nowt else th' do,
To guard eawr whoms un country, eawr Queen, un th' Factory Skoo.

Some lads ith' little spellin reads, un some does rule o' three,
Un some uts gone to th eend o' th' book, are a good deol fur nor me;
Ther's others if they getten th' news, ul read for one or two,
Un tawk of war, distress, or trade, at eawr Factory Skoo. (pp. 108–09)

In this case, there is the obvious tension between the perceived social status of dialect language and the presumed attainment of standardized speech and spelling which would be the goal of any Victorian educational programme. The implication is that either the speaker is reverting to type when away from the educational environment or the teaching is having little effect. This ironizing is only compounded by the use of repeated hyperbole beginning with the first line's apparent exaggeration of the economic crisis's magnitude. The chorus refrain of 'We're ladies neaw un gentlemen', which Eva Dema describes as 'gently mocking', is sung or said with the distinctive Lancashire pronunciation of 'now', deliberately overstating the social advancement afforded the school's attendees in such a way as to suggest a satirical barb whose target is dependent on the reading of a double address.[13] Read as an example of dramatic monologue the speaker may be unwittingly revealing pompous ignorance to proclaim refinement while exhibiting such verbal provincialism. Another reading has the speaker satirizing the educational authorities when the language used illustrates the extent to which their attempts at social engineering have failed. However, the chorus's claim is also undermined by the speaker's admission in the tenth line that they have failed to reach the end of the book they have been reading in class. This delineation of different levels of literacy in the group might alternatively be interpreted as characterizing a touching naivety when set alongside the ambition for self-improvement.

The second line of the chorus of 'Eawr Factory Skoo' is worth attention for two reasons. Less dependent on language choice, and more in keeping with the kind of social critique common in occasional Victorian poetry, the declaration that the attendees are 'paid for gooin Skoo' at first appears a positive statement. However, this is a reference to the fact that many unemployed textile operatives during the Cotton Famine were required to attend educational programmes in order to qualify for relief under the

[13] Eva Dema, 'Writing for Relief: Poetry, Labor, and the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–1865)', *Victorian Poetry*, 60.1 (2022), pp. 27–50 (p. 40), doi:10.1353/vp.2022.0001.

Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Municipal relief committees in different areas had different rules, and this in itself caused tension among workers when there were clear regional discrepancies between eligibility to receive the relief necessary to feed their families (*Fig. 1*). The speaker and his peers are not in fact 'paid' to attend school but are coerced into educational programmes in order to receive benefits. The line could also contain a critique of the inherent infantilization of the working classes, especially with the naive exaggeration apparent in other sections of the poem. This includes the hyperbolic valorization of the factory school included in the list of institutions to be guarded when the workers might become 'sodiers', with the school placed rather absurdly alongside 'eawr whoms un country, eawr Queen'. Indeed, the line 'For sodiers soon we shall o be, bekose we'n nowt else th' do' raises the spectre of mass conscription for male textile workers forced into unemployment by the Cotton Famine. In reality, the Public Works Manufacturing Districts Act 1864, enacted in July 1863, enabled local authorities to borrow money for large building projects, which meant that thousands of men were then coerced into digging sewers and landscaping public areas to qualify for relief.

Fig. 1: Contemporary image of Cotton Famine Relief Committee. Public domain.

Brief references to adult education in dialect poetry from the period are often revealing in the context in which they are placed. Because these poems are not directly addressing programmes which for many were seen as more beneficial

than exploitative, they have licence to report less sympathetic popular attitudes to adult education, enabled by brevity and ambiguity. 'The Beddin's Goan', by William Alexander Abram (1835–1894), was published in the radical-leaning *Blackburn Times* in November 1862, just as the winter which became known as the Big Freeze began to greatly exacerbate the circumstances of thousands already thrown into poverty by the closure of cotton mills and related industries.[14] The poem's speaker is the wife of a man attending an adult education programme, and she details conditions of grinding poverty made worse by the necessity of handing over bedding to the landlord in lieu of rent. Her children attempt to keep warm by huddling in her skirts, and in the final stanza the housewife predicts her own death, caused by the combination of a pulmonary complaint which may be tuberculosis, and the inability to fend off the freezing temperatures of a cold winter. However, the first stanza, beginning *in medias res* as so many dialect poems do, has the woman of the house confront her husband as he returns from an adult education class which was presumably a relief requirement:

EH! Robbut! th' lan'lord's bin tu-day,
  Whol tha wor deawn at th'class;
He sed 'twor herd tu mek foak pay,
  Bud he mut hev his brass,
An' aw mut awthur pay ur flit,
  An' which wor t' wost o' t' twon?
Aw'd nowt to pay him, nod a bit,
  Su neaw then th' beddin's goan!

As a fraught discussion between husband and wife, the opening of this poem is worth reading alongside the first stanza of Waugh's 'Come Whoam to thi Childer an' Me', whose register and social circumstance it effectively inverts. In this poem, however, the husband is silent, and his absence when the wife is forced to undertake this distressing transaction is compounded by the fact that he is not earning enough money to feed and shelter his family. This implicit emasculation of the head of the family in relation to unemployment is a common trope across Cotton Famine poetry which was written in different modes and addressed different aspects of the crisis; but here, through the reference to adult education, it is associated with feelings of infantilization and inadequacy. The husband is pointedly placed at the factory school at the very moment

[14] W. A. Abram, 'The Beddin's Goan', *Blackburn Times*, 29 November 1862 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt_1862-11-29_w-a-abram> [accessed 23 January 2025].

the economic tipping point occurs, and the relief system is exposed as not fit for purpose. Abram was a relatively educated man, a journalist and historian, who wrote poetry in a variety of modes and registers. This poem belongs to a class of texts which, as I have noted elsewhere, 'purport[ed] to reflect working-class culture whilst increasingly being written for a middle-class market hungry for tales of working life couched in tantalising linguistic obscurity'.[15] His decision to write this poem in Blackburn dialect obviously attempts to enable it to 'authentically' inhabit the character of the wife as speaker, but it also lends the piece an affecting poignancy. The reader's affective relationship with this kind of domestic dialect poetry, as with Waugh's work, is dependent on the effect of a linguistic immersion which only dialect can demand. The reader must 'speak' the sounds indicated in order to reach semantic resolution, which requires a particular investment in voice, idiolect, and rhythmic understanding. If a poem is a 'composition written for performance by the human voice', then dialect poetry is the form which insists most rigorously on the reader's performance, even if this is enacted silently, in the reader's head.[16] This intimacy enhances the affective function of poetry, which in occasional works often entails the evocation of specific emotional reactions to political events or social situations.

Lancashire dialect poetry was traditionally known for its broad humour, but during the Cotton Famine the traditional tropes of stock comic characters largely gave way to satirical treatments of political issues. In Williffe Cunliam's 'Settling th' War!' the status of being educated is itself satirized, as the speaker observes the luminaries of the town of Burnley pointlessly debating the outcome and effects of the American Civil War:

Wot's the matter? — wot's the matter? —
  Wot's theas folks, all staning raond?
Hez ther sum'uddy bin feightin,
  Ur ther's sum'uddy kill'd ur draown'd?

Oh! aw know, naoh, — aw'd forgettun —
  Welly six-months, fur ur nar,
Heer aor parlyment's bin meetin,
  Bizzy settling o' th' war.

[15] Simon Rennie, '[Re-]forming Cotton Famine Poetry — Some Implications', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27.1 (2022), pp. 153–59 (p. 154), doi:10.1093/jvcult/vcab056.

[16] Jon Stallworthy, 'Versification', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, 5th edn (Norton, 2005), pp. 2027–52 (p. 2027).

Chaps wi' noddles full o' larning;
Yeds ut's brasting wi' ther wit,
Heer yo'll find, boath neet un morning,
Gie'ing the world the benefit.[17]

Here, language is an inherent part of the humour, the speaker's working-class identity affirmed by his dialect speech patterns as he ironizes the lively political discussion. The use of dialect also redoubles the incongruity of the international context against the provincial scene. Intellectual achievement, at least in a provincial setting, is characterized as inadequate in the face of geopolitical events disrupting local industry and social conditions. Perhaps more seriously, the poem, which goes on to describe a deadlock between different factions arguing ('threopin') about who to support in the American Civil War and how best to revive industry, suggests that learning is part of the problem. Beyond its satirical target of middle-class pomposity and a deluded sense of political agency, the poem may refer to recorded instances of administrative paralysis among local authorities ('aor parlyment') and relief committees, which was blamed by some for the crippling delays in relief that had real human consequences. The writer of this poem's real name was William Cunliffe, and he was blacksmith who also wrote poetry for his local newspaper.[18]

Another manual worker who eventually became known for his poetry, in this case more successfully, was Blackburn's William Billington (1825–1884). Billington worked in various roles in cotton mills for many years but the Cotton Famine forced him to rely on writing and distributing his poetry, much of it in Blackburn dialect, to survive. After selling thousands of copies of broadsheet editions of his dialect poem 'Th' Shurat Weyvur' he became a full-time writer, publishing regularly in the *Blackburn Times*. It was in that left-leaning newspaper that he published his angriest political poem in 1864, 'Heaw to Ged Rich'.[19] The poem is something of an anomaly, because radical dialect poetry during the period is relatively rare. But criticizing the wealthy in Blackburn towards the end of the Cotton Famine, when many contemporary poems were praising the middle classes for their charitable efforts during the crisis, displays a

[17] Williffe Cunliam [William Cunliffe], 'Settling th'War', *Burnley Free Press and General Advertiser*, 22 August 1863 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bfp_1863-08-22_williffe-cunliam> [accessed 23 January 2025].

[18] Simon Rennie, 'Cunliffe, William [*pseud*. Williffe Cunliam] (bap. 1833, d. 1894)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 14 April 2022, doi:10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.90000380704.

[19] William Billington, 'Heaw to Ged Rich', *Blackburn Times*, 16 July 1864 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=tbt_1864-07-16_w-billington> [accessed 24 January 2025].

particular literary and political confidence. In a sense this is a list poem, and as such its bouncing dactylic rhythm lends it a slightly frenetic quality:

> Or beawnce into bisness, ged guds uppo strap!
> Place yore paw upon o yo con rend or con rap;
> Then play fast and loce in an underhand way,
> Be th' fost mon to porchase, bud th' last mon to pay;
> If there's a skoo-meetin, be shure to be cheer mon,
> An jungle yore tin at a charity sermon;
> An shud yo at last ged yore streng among th' pitch,
> Ged a frend and ged whitewashed, and still yo'll be rich.

Among the different ways that readers are taught to exploit a corrupted local economy, supporting the local factory school appears, and it seems apparent that as institutions these are perceived to be part of a system of class oppression. Apart from the humour inherent in rhyming 'cheer mon' with 'charity sermon', rhyme links the institutions referred to in these two lines. 'Charity' was a dirty word among working people in Lancashire, and especially so during the Cotton Famine, when 'aid' or 'relief' were preferred as representing the necessary amelioration of temporary circumstances.

As already indicated, for all the direct or implicit criticisms of adult education programmes in Lancashire dialect poems in the first half of the 1860s, there were works which celebrated their efforts, and broader attempts to raise the intellectual status of working people. Billington's equivalent figure in Stalybridge, an industrial town seven miles east of Manchester, was Samuel Laycock (1826–1893). He was also a textile worker made unemployed by the Cotton Famine and similarly became famous writing vernacular poetic accounts of the suffering of working people during the crisis. Laycock, an autodidact with no formal education beyond Sunday school, was an enthusiastic supporter of adult education efforts, and in 1865 became the librarian of the Stalybridge Mechanics' Institution. Two years before, he memorialized his first encounter with the establishment with a dialect poem published in his local newspaper referred to as 'Lines Read before the Members of the Stalybridge Mechanics Institution on Saturday Evening, Sep. 12, 1863'.[20] When the poem was sold as a one-penny broadsheet in the Stalybridge and Ashton area it was referred to as 'Th' Mechanics o' Seturday Neet'. The first lines express surprise at the level of intellectual attainment apparent at the institution, but also make a particular point of noting the mix of social classes in the environment:

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[20] Samuel Laycock, 'Lines Read before the Members of the Stalybridge Mechanics Institution on Saturday Evening, Sep. 12, 1863', *Ashton and Stalybridge Reporter*, 3 October 1863 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=asr_1863-10-03_samuel-laycock> [accessed 24 January 2025].

> Aw wur deawn at th' Mechanics last Setterday neet,
> An' oh! let me tell yo', aw had sich a treat;
> Had aw known 'at they'd had as mich talent as that,
> Aw'd ha' gone afore neaw, iv aw'd popp'd mi owd hat.
> There wur o' macks o' tradesmen, sit smokin' i' th' room,
> There wur blacksmiths fro' th' anvil, an' weavers fro' th' loom,
> Mechanics an' joiners, an' snobs not a few,
> Professors o' music, an' schoomesturs too;
> There wur piecers, an' spinners, an' managers there,
> Come to spend a few heawrs, an' to drive away care.
> There's pappers for those 'at's a fancy to read,
> Wi' o' shades ov opinion, to suit every creed.

Given the specificity of the subject matter, this poem acts more concretely as a linguistic bridge between classes and levels of education than previous examples cited. The vernacular phonetics work alongside the celebration of education and trans-class homosocial leisure to suggest an atmosphere of social and political harmony. In Stalybridge, of all places, this was particularly desirable. The only substantial civil disturbances in the north-west of England during the Cotton Famine occurred in the town just six months before this poem was written, when police subdued rioters protesting at changes to the system of relief awards. The Stalybridge Bread Riot of March 1863 came at the end of the long Big Freeze and warned authorities that the compliance of the working classes in conditions of prolonged poverty could not be taken for granted. Significantly, the trigger for the violence centred on payment for school attendance:

> In March 1863 the seventeen thousand [Stalybridge] men and boys in the emergency schools were receiving 3s 4d a head, all in cash, when the Executive Committee in Manchester, anticipating that distress might continue for a long time, ordered the local Relief Committee to economise. Those attending the schools were accordingly warned that henceforward they would receive only 3s a week, of which only 1s 4d would be in cash, while to encourage regular attendance a day's pay would be kept in hand. At their next pay-day the men therefore found themselves offered only 2s 5d, most of it in vouchers, in place of their customary 3s 4d.[21]

Though the subsequent Stalybridge Riot was quickly quelled, and in the aftermath partly blamed on agitators from outside the town, it is possible to trace the echoes of its anxieties in Laycock's poem. A form of double address is apparent, with working-

[21] Longmate, p. 191.

class readers being encouraged to improve themselves by attending the institution, and middle-class readers being assured that the efforts of educationalists and benefactors were appreciated by workers. One significant difference between Blackburn's William Billington and Stalybridge's Samuel Laycock, however, lies in their attitude to alcohol. Billington was an enthusiastic drinker and eventually bought a public house with proceeds from his writings, where he encouraged a lively literary drinking culture. Laycock occasionally expressed temperance sympathies in his poetry and in one section of his Mechanics' Institution poem the virtues of sobriety and learning are associated with a specific type of valorized masculinity:

> It's far afore ceawerin' at th' alehouse awm sure;
> It keeps a young fellow moor *manly* an' pure.
> It's far afore ceawerin' awhoam ov a lump,
> As ignorant o' th' world as ony owd stump;
> It's far afore goin' to th' theatre, too,
> For awm certain we'n theatre-goers enoo.
> What we're wantin' at present is *real sterlin' men*,
> Wi' a talent for speakin' or usin' a pen,
> Wi' courage to do what they know to be reet,
> Noan feart o' their actions bein' browt eawt to th' leet.

There is a hint of Puritanism in the denigration of the theatrical environment, but it is not clear whether this refers to literary drama or entertainments aimed at working-class audiences. The italics for 'manly' and 'real sterlin' men' are Laycock's own, and it is possible to detect in the emphasis and repetition an anxiety related to masculine resistance to learning as part of an emasculating or infantilizing process. Laycock declares sobriety and education a social imperative, celebrating higher levels of consciousness, expression, and presumably, political influence. It may be that Laycock identifies the inability to properly express political opinions as part of the cause of the violence in the town a few months before, and as much as this is a poem concerned with morality and self-improvement, there is an encouragement of more effective trans-class dialogue of the kind suggested by the resolutions in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854). That novel was based on the industrially fraught atmosphere around the Preston Lockout of 1853–54, but Gaskell was active as a fundraiser in Manchester during the Cotton Famine, and her Unitarian minister husband, William, was an amateur expert in Lancashire dialect and an advocate of working-class education. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), played a significant part in the initial national popularization of Lancashire dialect, with its Mancunian characters' dialogue rendered

as a watered-down representation of local speech patterns, sprinkled with the more accessible dialect terms such as *clem* and *gradely*. The more conservative dialect poems of the first half of the 1860s often reflected the sensibilities of the social novels of the time in their encouragement of working-class moral and intellectual betterment.

Laycock's 'Sewin' Class Song' might be read as an example of this, encouraging unemployed women to make the best of their situation through the celebration of the mass mobilization of educational efforts. The upbeat register of the poem may indeed reflect aspects of reality, in that Norman Longmate notes that 'sewing schools were a much greater success than the comparable establishments for men' (p. 183). Nevertheless, the poem seems anxious to manufacture a sense of community spirit, and the first line betrays at least the possibility of a less than favourable attitude to the workers' present lot:

> Come, lasses, let's cheer up, an' sing, it's no use lookin' sad,
> We'll mak' eawr sewin' schoo' to ring, an' stitch away loike mad;
> We'll mak' th' best job we con o' owt we han to do,
> We read an' write, an' spell an' kest, while here at th' sewin' schoo'.
>
> Chorus
> Then, lasses, let's cheer up an' sing, etc.
>
> Eawr Queen, th' Lord Mayor o' London, too, they send us lots o' brass,
> An' neaw, at welly every schoo', we'n got a sewin' class;
> We'n superintendents, cutters eawt, an' visitors an' o;
> We'n parsons, cotton mesturs, too, come in to watch us sew.[22]

The poem also appears to endorse an uncomfortable culture of surveillance, with the pupils in the school, many of whom would have been grown women with children of their own, exhibited to visitors, no doubt primarily to justify the programme's expenditure. However, Laycock inadvertently paints a scene of one-sided patriarchal gaze, with infantilized women seemingly regularly viewed by professional men. While the language in this poem functions in much the same way as the dialect in the poems discussed above, knowingly utilizing an idiom shared between a specific social group to address a broader social issue, its conscious designation as a 'song' also complicates its reception. The pattern of linguistic and cultural distances which dialect poetry enacts when 'performed' in the individual reader's mind is significantly disrupted when at

[22] Samuel Laycock, 'The Sewin' Class Song', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, pp. 109–10.

least the chorus is intended to be recited as collective experience. Performed as song the language shifts from potentially indicating an individual idiolect to a distinctive social expression.

Laycock's celebration of an educational community might be compared with a contemporary standard English poem which presents the sewing school experience in a very different light. 'How to Live on Three Shillings a Week, Or The Poor Surat Weaver's Lament' is a remarkable poem in that it refers to the exact weekly wage which precipitated the Stalybridge Riots, and was published just a few weeks before the riots occurred. Here, the speaker is considered ineligible for the sewing school, despite evident impoverishment:

Hungry, weary and wan,
Useless the kettle and pan;
  I applied for a pass,
  To the sewing class,
To a kindly reputed man.

'What have you in earnings, now?'
Asked he, with a clouded brow.
  I, with modesty meek,
  Said, 'Three shillings per week;'
He said 'There's no stitching for you.'

I replied, whereupon,
'My chemise are done;
My underclothes all worn to rags;
  The dress I now wear,
  You see is threadbare,
And the soles of my feet on the flags.

'Three muffins per day,
But no coffee or tea;
A penny for 'tatoes at noon;
  Three farthings for fuel,
  A farthing for gruel,
Leaves nothing to pay for my room.[23]

[23] 'How to Live on Three Shillings A Week, Or The Poor Surat Weaver's Lament', *Bury Guardian*, 7 March 1863 <https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=bg_1863-03-07_unknown> [accessed 24 January 2025].

Surat was the Indian cotton variant which replaced the American product and was despised for its short fibres, making it difficult to work. Often referred to in dialect poems as 'Shurat', it became a byword for impoverishment and industrial discontent. Arguably, there is one dialect term included in this anonymous poem, but the rather self-conscious ''tatoes' is a much fuller pronunciation than the glottal stopped ''ta'ers' which even today are referred to in the north of England. It might be that the report of a conversation between a stricken Lancastrian woman and a middle-class gatekeeper requires an even linguistic mode to work, but the central topic here is that people were clearly falling between the cracks in the system. An early form of 'benefits trap' was creating a subclass of people who were too poor to subsist but not poor enough to receive relief. In this light perhaps Laycock's valorization of the sewing class environment makes even more sense.

However, Laycock's 'Sewin' Class Song' might also be compared with his own 'It's hard to ceawr i' th' chimney nook', which, in detailing the poverty of a family afflicted by the depravations of the Cotton Famine, suggests that the money received from the sewing class was woefully insufficient. The speaker of the poem is one of the children of the family, and in the third stanza they describe their sister's situation:

> Eawr Mary Jane's a bonny lass,
> Wi' two such rosy cheeks;
> Hoo goes to th' Refuge sewin' class,
> An' has done neaw for weeks.
> Poor thing! hoo's badly starved, aw know,
> Hoo's scarcely owt to wear;
> Aw do so wish 'at somebody'd co,
> 'At's getten owt to spare.[24]

If there is an inconsistency of register in relation to the attitude of these two poems to the sewing school system, or even the perception of political hypocrisy, it may be claimed in defence that dialect poems are almost always related by a fictitious individual speaker, and these might naturally differ in their outlook. But the jaunty register of 'The Sewin' Class Song' does nothing to suggest that any of the attendees being viewed by a succession of middle-class visitors are 'badly starved', as the other poem's Mary Jane is described. Just as in Abram's 'The Beddin's Goan', the system of education and relief is revealed to be an insufficient bulwark against destructive poverty. If there is a pattern here, it is that when dialect poems which are domestically based look askance

[24] Samuel Laycock, 'It's hard to ceawr i' th' chimney nook', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, pp. 104–05.

at the adult education relief system, they are more critical than poems which address the system directly.

Joseph Ramsbottom was the dialect poet whose contemporary collection specifically detailing the woes of working-class Lancastrians during the Cotton Famine, *Phases of Distress* (1864), was positively reviewed by the metropolitan *Examiner*. The collection contains just twelve poems and in a reflection of metropolitan interest in north-west culture and the social situation during the Cotton Famine it was published simultaneously in London and Manchester. Ramsbottom was from the latter city and despite his poetry's brief national popularity, his use of dialect is relatively dense, with distinctive orthography and liberal use of relatively obscure dialect terms. Remarkably, all twelve of the poems in *Phases of Distress* are presented in exactly the same form, with iambic tetrameters arranged in octet stanzas rhymed ABABCDCD. All of the poems are spoken by individual characters, and they address different aspects of the social conditions created by the crisis. 'Gooin t' schoo' addresses the subject of adult educational programmes but notably does not mention these until the fifth of its eight stanzas. The first half of the poem details the conditions of grinding poverty which the speaker and his family are suffering despite the assistance of aid. The speaker is the patriarch of the family and is 42 years old. Near the beginning of the poem he expresses shame that 'We walk abeawt i' th' leet o' th' day | I' clooas ut sumdy else has bowt'.[25] Although the first four stanzas describe conditions of poverty the predominant emotion expressed appears to be shame centred on the reliance upon relief or charity. There is a sense of loss of personal and collective identity:

> To thrust to sumdy else for bread,
> An' by th' relief keep torin' on,
> Maks honest folk to hang their yead,
> An' crushes th' heart o' th' preawdest mon.
> We known it's not eawr bread we ate,
> We known they're not eawr clooas we wear,
> We want agen eawr former state,
> Eawr former dhrudgin' life o' care.

In this respect Ramsbottom's poem, along with others in the collection, might be grouped with scores of poems written during the Cotton Famine which present the working classes as honest, hardworking, and, most importantly, self-reliant when provided with the means to support themselves. While part of the function of this

[25] Joseph Ramsbottom, 'Gooin' t' schoo', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, pp. 110–11.

widespread representation is to justify relief efforts for the 'deserving poor', there is also a concomitant political narrative relating to enfranchisement. As an agency of political discourse, poetry was part of the effort to present a moral working class as deserving of political representation. The contemporary Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer William Gladstone 'pointed to the fortitude displayed during the cotton famine as evidence that these workers were capable of acting with politically responsible disinterest and therefore merited full political rights', and after the Second Reform Act of 1867, the first working-class men in Britain were awarded voting rights.[26] In the contemporary and subsequent narratives of the Cotton Famine, poetic or otherwise, the trouble in Stalybridge is always presented as an anomaly.

Unlike the speaker in Moss's 'Eawr Factory Skoo', Ramsbottom's patriarch reports his educational progress and relates the achievements of being able to read parts of the Bible and read out the newspaper to the rest of the family. The journey is initially a humiliating one, however, and the second half of the poem is an account of a midlife encounter with literacy and numeracy:

> Their help has bin great help to me,
> It's that alone ut sent me t' schoo;
> It's that ut towt me th' A B C,
> For o aw'd turnt o' forty-two.
> 'T wur rayther hard at fust to sit
> An' stare at things aw couldno tell,
> Cose when owt puzzl't me a bit,
> O th' lads ud laugh among thersel'.
>
> A mon grown up, an' owd as me,
> To stop before a letther fast;
> Wur gradely fun for them to see,
> Bo aw geet thro', an' that's o' past.
> I' th' news aw neaw con read a bit;
> I' the' Bible spell a chapther thro';
> Con write a line ut's fair an' fit;
> An' multiply, divide, an' do.

[26] Julie M. Wise, 'From Langham Place to Lancashire: Poetry, Community, and the Victoria Press's *Offering to Lancashire*', *Victorian Poetry*, 47.3 (2009), pp. 517–32 (p. 517), doi:10.1353/vp.0.0067.

The ‘they’ who help are only identified as ‘folk’ in the poem but clearly represent the middle classes who organize relief and educational programmes. There is no sense of resentment in the poem, rather intense gratitude. Nor is there any mention of the likely fact that attendance at the classes was compulsory in order to receive the relief which provided food and clothing. The piece concludes with a couplet which presents adult education as a beneficial consequence of a tragic episode: ‘A gradely plague it’s bin to me — | It’s bin a gradely blessin’ too’. The use of the Old Norse remnant ‘gradely’ (*greiðligr*) as the adjectival link in these lines is worthy of note. It is usually translated as ‘fine’ or ‘upstanding’, but applied to ‘plague’ it appears to be used as a general intensifier. The alternative is the implication that ‘gradely’ is here being used ironically, as in ‘another fine mess’. In either case the links between the social consequences of the Cotton Famine, negative and positive, are enhanced and linguistically elided into each other.

However, if, as Brian Hollingworth asserted, increases in educational efforts in the 1860s spelt the beginning of the end of a distinctive tradition of dialect poetry, then Ramsbottom’s poem can be read structurally as an account of such a process. The first half relates the end of a way of life, the reduction of a whole class to a group lacking even the necessities of life, while the second sees the social fabric rewoven in a different form. Longmate suggests that in the provision of education programmes ‘all religious denominations in Lancashire worked together, or at least alongside each other, with remarkable harmony’ (p. 183). Alongside the altruistic impulse which no doubt occasioned this spirit of cooperation, the opportunity to mould the intellects, or indeed the souls, of previously less amenable citizens must surely have been accompanied by a great recruiting drive for the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Nonconformist organizations involved in the educational programmes. To varying degrees, education would have been accompanied by indoctrination, and it is not such a stretch to imagine that the pedagogic standardization of language was accompanied by a concomitant standardization of moral or spiritual behaviour. Of course, this would especially have been the case for the children that the Cotton Famine encouraged into previously unavailable education. The fact that some relief committees made it a condition of relief award that families sent their children to school can be seen as part of the positive process that led to the UK effectively achieving full literacy by the end of the century, but it would be remiss to ignore the consequences of the extent to which the moral and political agendas of various institutions were irreversibly integrated into working-class lives.

This article does not argue that Cotton Famine dialect poetry can be compared to standard English works on the same subject in any kind of systematic political analysis.

There are ideological variations across the forms. However, quite apart from the inherent irony of the discussion of education being carried via an 'uneducated' idiom, the use of dialect has been demonstrated to offer examples where indeterminacy is predicated on linguistic difference or obscurity. And in the case of dialect poetry, the topic is more acutely existential, linguistically, generically, and in relation to broader culture. Just as the dialect poetry which has been discussed in this article can be seen to have recounted the narratives leading to its own generic dissolution, the acceleration of educational efforts during the period disrupted the vaunted self-reliance of the working class in the region. It would be a long time before the UK had anything which could be described as a welfare state, but in Lancashire in the 1860s the standardization of provision and the way it was tied to educational requirements was a distinct precursor. Written in the 1950s, Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* offered an account of working-class cultural decay and resistance during the early decades of the modern British welfare state. As a self-conscious literary form reliant on the perception of working-class authenticity, dialect poetry of the Cotton Famine offers similar examples of decay and resistance which represents an intriguing window into a little studied but historically significant period of working-class British culture.