

Oxford DNB: April 2022

Welcome to the eighty-fifth update of the Oxford DNB, which adds thirteen biographies, in twelve articles, accompanied by two portrait likenesses, with a special focus on Victorian working-class poets.

From April 2022, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 64,444 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,091 articles. 11,911 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Introduction to the update by Kirstie Blair

Victorian Working-Class Poets

The writers represented in this cluster of new entries highlight the diversity and richness of local literary cultures in nineteenth-century Britain. All were known primarily as poets, and had significant local or in some cases national and international reputations as such during their lifetimes. But they also wrote plays, prose, fiction and autobiographies. As their autobiographical or biographical accounts attest, they were voracious readers, consuming literature wherever they found it, and engaging with classical literature (Jessie Russell) and European languages (Ruth Wills), as well as the English-language canon. They edited as well as contributed to newspapers and periodicals, and they participated in associational culture, including significant work with political associations. All this cultural activity took place in their very limited leisure time, and in combination with demanding daily labour outside and inside the home.

Reading across these entries, it becomes immediately obvious how much working-class literature was supported by the newspaper and periodical culture of mid-late Victorian Britain. While most of the poets included here did publish their poems in pamphlet or book form, they needed the local

press to gain an initial audience for their verse, and to review and support their publications. And not simply the local press: Ellen Forrester and her son Arthur Marshall Forrester, as part of the Irish emigrant community in England, published in the Irish press, while two of these poets, Evan MacColl and Jessie Russell, ended up as influential Scottish emigrant poets (and newspaper poets) in Canada and New Zealand. Indeed, what emerges from these biographies is how mobile 'local' poets often were in this period, as writers like Thomas Blackah and William Cunliffe emigrated overseas in search of work and later returned, or moved from country to city, or from England to Scotland, frequently changing residence and employment. Although local identity and local support was crucial for most of these writers, the local and the global were inseparable. Issues such as American slavery, European nationalist causes, and Irish republicanism, appear in their pages alongside poems dealing with their immediate geographical vicinity.

Almost no working-class writer in the Victorian period made significant income from their poetry. Newspaper poets were not paid for their contributions, and while periodicals did sometimes pay contributors, it depended on the status and policy of that specific periodical. For every writer here, however, the precarity of their economic circumstances meant that poetry was a useful means to transfer cultural capital into actual capital. Selling books, pamphlets, dialect

almanacs or other works was one option. Appeals to the Royal Literary Fund—though as we see here, these were often unsuccessful—were another. Sometimes oral performance, as in Fanny Forrester's recitations, might bring in some income. More occluded from view, in many cases, are the ways in which literary reputation enhanced both an individual's chance of attracting charitable donations and patronage, and their prospects for promotion and support at work. David Wingate would not have been a mine manager, as opposed to a collier, if not for his writings. Would Wills, who, like many poets, dedicated a collection to her employer, have been a forewoman if she had not been known as a poet? For all those working-class writers—and there were many, including several here—who died in poverty and in extremely difficult circumstances, there were others whose literary efforts lifted them into a more secure position.

The other notable connection between many of these poets lies in their contribution to the linguistic diversity of Britain. MacColl's significant body of Gaelic poetry stands out here, but it is also vital to note Cunliffe and Blackah's influence on Lancashire and Yorkshire dialect writing, or Wingate and Russell's contribution to Scots. It is equally important to notice which working-class poets did not write extensively in dialect, because it was far more rare for women writers to enter or flourish in the growing field of dialect literature in English and Scots. Women working-class poets in general

faced considerably more restrictions in terms of societal perceptions of the appropriate form and content for women's verse, which makes it all the more remarkable that the women poets included here did write salvos on politics, society, and the rights and wrongs of women, among their more standard productions.

Reading these biographies together additionally emphasizes the growing connection between working-class writers and the rise of Victorian industry. Blackah and Wingate were miners, Wingate in one of the most heavily industrialized regions of Britain, North Lanarkshire. Russell was linked to the Clydeside shipbuilding industry, an industry that also features in Bernstein's poems. Forrester and Wills were textile factory workers, as were most of Elizabeth Campbell's family members; Cunliffe was best known for his poems on the textile trade and the American Civil War. Leno worked as a printer, a trade which again changed dramatically through the invention of new machinery and methods. Though not all of these poets lived in industrial towns and cities, only James Withers, of Cambridgeshire, was a 'rural' poet throughout his lifetime. With birth dates from 1804 to 1851, all of these writers lived through a period of extraordinarily rapid change, in which the landscape around them altered, seemingly irrevocably, and new technologies of transport, communication, and printing changed the literary and media worlds in which they operated as writers. They also lived

through radical social movements, from the agitation of the 1810s and 1820s, to the rise of Chartism, through to late-century socialism; several of them contributed, in different ways, to these movements.

The poets here are a representative selection, who are known today because of the work of indefatigable late Victorian anthologizers, like D. H. Edwards of Brechin, or because of the retrieval work performed by twentieth and twenty-first century scholars, including Florence Boos's work on women working-class poets, Brian Maidment, John Goodridge and others' anthologies, and new projects such as Simon Rennie's 'The Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine.' Of particular note is the open-access Catalogue of Labouring-Class and Self-Taught Poets and Poetry c.1700-1900, edited by Goodridge, which had 2,340 entries as of 2021, and continues to grow. But many working-class poets will never be added to such resources, because they published anonymously or pseudonymously in ephemeral locations, or because their works belonged primarily to oral traditions. A selection such as this makes it clear how many influential and interesting British writers remain to be recovered, as well as how many will, sadly, remain lost.

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Humanities at the University of Stirling. She is the author of *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (2019).

April 2022: summary of newly-added content

Born in rural Forfarshire (now Angus), the Scottish poet and autobiographer **Elizabeth Campbell (née Duncan) (1804-1878)** began her working life on farms, before her marriage to a handloom weaver. Settling in Brechin, where she worked as a weaver and a laundress, she began publishing booklets of poems – many decrying the anguish of the marginalized – in the 1860s, to supplement the family income. Her collected *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (1875) included her autobiographical memoir. The Gaelic poet **Evan MacColl [Eóghann MacColla; known as Bàrd Loch Fìne]**, born at Lochfyneside, Argyll, into a Gaelic-speaking farming household, was a voracious reader of English and Scots literature in childhood. His first volume of poetry, published in 1835, consisted of sixty-three songs in English and sixty-nine in Gaelic. His work was included in John MacKenzie's canonical 1841 anthology of Gaelic poetry. He later emigrated to Canada where he was recognized as an authority on Gaelic matters. The Cambridgeshire poet **James Reynolds Withers** (1812-1892), the son of a shoemaker, received no schooling, and made his living from helping a shoemaker, agricultural labour, and marketing gardening. He

began writing poetry in childhood and came to the notice of a sponsor. Three volumes of his work were published between 1854 and 1861, bringing him national attention. His poems, which ranged beyond the purely pastoral, were admired for their simplicity and elegance. The Leicester poet and factory worker **Ruth Wills (1826-1908)**, brought up by her widowed mother, a framework knitter, had an impoverished childhood and only two years' schooling, but was a voracious reader. She began writing poetry, which she continued while working in a hosiery factory, and had poems published in the Leicester Mercury and elsewhere. Two volumes of her Lays of Lowly Life were published, in 1861 (prefaced by an autobiography) and 1868. She worked in the hosiery factory for fifty years, and rose to become a forewoman and manager. The Uxbridge poet, printer, and radical activist **John Bedford Leno (1826-1894)** received his early education from his mother, who ran a dame's school, before being apprenticed to a printer and embracing Chartist politics. He became a printer, publisher, and editor and was at the centre of London radical politics, while writing poetry addressing the themes of labour, domesticity, and the natural world, which enjoyed wide popularity, though he was never financially successful. The Lanarkshire collier poet and autobiographer, **David Wingate (1828-1892)**, who became one of the best-known working-class poets of the period, was born on the outskirts of Glasgow, the son of a miner who died in a colliery explosion, and himself started working in

the mines from the age of nine. He had poems published in Glasgow newspapers from about 1850 but achieved widespread publicity and reviews when his work was published by Blackwood's publishing house in the following decade. Later in life his series of 'Mining Memories' contained semi-autobiographical accounts of incidents in his life. A north Yorkshire poet **Thomas Blackah (1828-1895)** worked in lead mines from the age of nine, and began publishing his poetry in the local newspaper press as 'A Working Miner'. He published his own collection of Nidderdale dialect poetry in 1867 and from 1863 to 1880 published a comic dialect almanac, which he sold in the shop which he kept at Greenhow Hill. His work was also included in Yorkshire anthologies. Among Lancashire dialect poets, the Burnley poet **William Cunliffe [pseud. Williffe Cunliam] (bap. 1833, d. 1894)** began publishing poetry and comic prose in the Burnley press. His poems, both in standard English and Lancashire dialect, particularly addressed the crisis brought about by the Lancashire cotton famine during the American civil war. The lives of three members of a family of Irish immigrants in Lancashire are included in this update. **Ellen Forrester [née Magennis] (1828-1883)** was widowed and left to support her family by working as a seamstress and by publishing occasional poetry. In 1867 she was secretary to the defence fund raised for the Fenian Manchester martyrs. She encouraged her children's writing and wrote a collection of Irish patriotic lyrics, Songs of

the Rising Nation with her son **Arthur Marshall Forrester (1849-1895)**, who had embraced revolutionary Irish politics and became a Fenian arms agent in Lancashire, for which he was imprisoned. Among his contributions to the collection was 'The Felons of Our Land', a popular rebel song. His sister, **Frances [Fanny] Forrester (1851-1889)** became a mill worker to help support the family and also began to write poetry. Her work was taken up by Ben Brierley's Journal where she published over 80 poems between 1870 and 1878, and she was the subject of a special profile. Her work was never gathered in a collection and, latterly unemployed, she died in poverty. The Glasgow poet and music teacher **Marion Bernstein (1846-1906)** grew up in London where her Prussian-born father taught languages, but financial difficulties following his death caused the family to move to Scotland, where she made a small living teaching music. In the 1870s she began publishing poetry in the Glasgow Weekly Mail, to which she was a prolific contributor in the 1870s, addressing women's issues and religious themes. Born in Glasgow, **Jessie Russell [née Laing] (1850-1923)** was a very quick learner in childhood, and recalled reading through the bible at the age of five. After being orphaned she worked as a seamstress, and began having poetry published in the Glasgow press, which was gathered in a book-length publication in 1877, making her a rarity among working-class women writers. She emigrated to New Zealand in 1885

where she worked as a housekeeper and became a Salvation
Army matron.