'I think I shall soon be qualified to be my own editor': Peasant Poets and the Control of Literary Production

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'I think I shall soon be qualified to be my own editor'. Clare's words in this title come from a wonderful letter to his publisher Hessey of [July 1820] deploring the requirements of false delicacy, which continues 'I think to please all & offend all we shoud put out 215 pages of blank leaves & call it "Clare in fashion" [...]'.[1] His statement seems to sum up the frustrations felt by many writers labelled as peasant poets as they sought publication for their work, and in Clare's letters many expressions, references, and experiences seem almost identical to those of James Hogg in particular. Both, of course, presented themselves and were presented by others as culturally primitive, making use of an interest in the oracular and ancient as exemplified in the Hebrew poetry of the translated Bible, in ballads, and in the work of Ossian. Edward Young in his *Conjectures On Original Composition* of 1759, for example, had distinguished between two classes of composition, the original which imitates nature itself and is of vegetable growth, and the imitation which copies authors and is manufactured.[2] Young intended of course to make the point that 'illustrious Examples *engross*, *prejudice*, and *intimidate*', but his classification irresistibly brings to mind the economic difference between a weak mercantile system which merely produces raw materials and a developed one which by manufacturing adds value to them.

Both Clare and Hogg refer to originality in similar terms to Young, Clare enquiring, for example, whether a new poet 'puts on the Spectackles of Books becomes an Imitator or writes from Nature in Original'.[3] Similarly Hogg in his *Lay Sermons* gives the following advice to young men of imagination:

> Take the simplicity of Moses, the splendour of Job, David, and Isaiah. Take Homer, and, if you like, Hesiod, Pindar, and Ossian; and by all means William Shakespeare. In

> short, borrow the fire and vigour of an early period of society, when a nation is verging from barbarism into civilisation; and then you will imbibe the force of genius from its original source.[4]

Alongside this insistence on being close to nature, originality, and pure inspiration, however, sat an uneasy awareness of an increasingly sophisticated modern economy. Clare obviously had in mind the changing landscape of England produced by agricultural enclosure when he supposed indignantly to Allan Cunningham that the Lord Byron of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* would look upon himself, Cunningham and Hogg as 'intruders and stray cattle in the fields of the Muses', relics of an older way of life unsuited to modern conditions. In lines such as 'I found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down' Clare promotes his poetry as natural growth underemphasising cultural production.[5] A high proportion of the original geniuses Hogg holds up as examples to young men of imagination, it should be noted, were creating their work within a predominantly oral context. Original genius of the kind indicated by Young, and adopted by and for writers such as Clare and Hogg, implies closeness to nature and inspiration but it also indicates distance from the learning, writing, and publishing of the early nineteenth century.

Towards the end of his life Hogg acted as adviser to another shepherd with literary aspirations, Henry Scott Riddell, who recollected Hogg's criticism of his manuscript novel 'The Border Baron' as divided between pleasure in his talent and irritation at his inability to present his work in a form that would not lead to instant rejection by a publisher.

> [...] when he returned it, he appeared half angry and half pleased: His manner and language on that occasion I can never forget, nor yet can I ever reflect upon it for a moment without laughing out-right: but it is indescribable—He said that there were more rawness and more genius in it, than any book that he ever had aught to do wi'—'but L—d man Henry the spelling will never do—it is really terrible: If ye were showing the M.S. to Blackwood, or any other bookseller, the very first line would convince him that the Author was either mad or that he had been educated in Arabia.'[6]

Hogg's comment here indicates that by the end of his life he had, to some extent at least, got the measure of a publisher's prejudices

without acquiring a similar blind-spot of his own, and felt he could be an agent of literary manufacture as well as a supplier of the raw materials of genius. The present article refers briefly to some of the ways in which Hogg tried to do this. I hope that occasional reference to other peasant poets such as Allan Cunningham, William Nicholson, and (especially) John Clare will stimulate discussion among those who are much better informed about them than I pretend to be.

Hogg's first important contact with the literary society of Edinburgh was with Walter Scott (who was also Sheriff of Selkirkshire), for whom he was a source of ballad lore for the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, a member of the notable Laidlaw family of Ettrick Forest, and the son and nephew of ballad performers. In a series of eager letters Hogg recounted his search for ballads, his visits to old people and transcriptions of their performances, as he gradually became aware that the oral culture he had grown up with and taken for granted was of value in the literary society of Edinburgh. His later account of this experience in his *Memoir of the Author's Life* indicates, though, that his local reputation as a song-maker compromised his value as a passive transmitter of tradition and that he expected to be regarded with some suspicion by Scott and his friends. After hearing Hogg's mother chant the ballad of 'Auld Maitland' Scott preceded Hogg to Ramseycleuch farm, and on arriving there Hogg's first encounter was with Scott's liveryman

> [...] at whom I asked if the Shirra was come?
>
> 'O, ay, lad, the Shirra's come,' said he. 'Are ye the chiel that maks the auld ballads and sings them?'
>
> I said I fancied I was he that he meant, though I had never made ony very *auld* ballads.[7]

That was about to change, though. Having read the third volume of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* Hogg records that 'I was much dissatisfied with the imitations of the ancient ballads contained in it, and immediately set about imitating the ancient ballads myself' (*Memoir*, p. 16) the result of which was *The Mountain Bard* issued in 1807 by the leading Edinburgh publisher Archibald Constable, and Hogg's first important collection of poetry. The title was intended to advertise the poet as traditional bard, while the name James Hogg on the title-page indicated a modern author: by virtue of being an Ettrick Shepherd Hogg laid claim to beat the Edinburgh literary

circle of Scott at its own game. His poems demonstrated his talents as an author of fashionable ballad-imitations, while substantial notes provided evidence of his extensive local and antiquarian lore. It was in fact a claim to be an original genius *and* (to paraphrase Clare's words) to be his own editor. In recommending it to his antiquarian friend Robert Surtees, Scott praised 'both the verse and the prose of this little publication'.[8]

Real success came to Hogg with the publication of *The Queen's Wake* in January 1813, when as Mrs Garden expresses it, Hogg was 'universally received into the guild of Poets',[9] corresponding with Byron and Southey and being courted by other aspiring poets to use his influence with publishers on their behalf. The Galloway poet William Nicholson, for example, in the prefatory Advertisement to his *Tales, in Verse, and Miscellaneous Poems: Descriptive of Rural Life and Manners* (Edinburgh, 1814) acknowledges Hogg's 'generous and unwearied attention, since the Author came to Edinburgh, where he was almost friendless, and unknown'. Nicholson had been a pedlar in his native district in the south-west of Scotland, where he had a local reputation as what would now be called a performance artist, playing the pipes, singing his songs, and reciting his poetry at the houses on his round. When his business failed Nicholson decided to get his poems published in Edinburgh, in a move that shadows Hogg's own career-shift four years earlier, despite the fact that unlike James Hogg he was barely literate and his poems had to be transcribed for him before they were acceptable as copy for the printer. It is pleasant to think of Hogg lending a helping hand to a poet who was even more at the mercy of publishers than himself, and curious to speculate what effect his own editorial hand had on Nicholson's publication. It was not only a socially disadvantaged writer like Nicholson who looked up to the successful poet of *The Queen's Wake*, however. Hogg seems to have acted as a successful literary agent for his friend James Gray, classics master at the Edinburgh High school, since the London firm of Longmans published Gray's *Cona; or the Vale of Clwyd* in 1814 on Hogg's recommendation.[10] Even John Wilson, who was afterwards to dismiss Hogg's literary achievements so cruelly in the pages of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, eagerly requested Hogg to interest the London publisher John Murray in his work:

> If you have occasion soon to write to Murray, pray introduce something about 'The City of the Plague,' as I shall probably offer him that poem in about a fortnight or

> sooner. Of course I do not wish you to say that the poem is utterly worthless. I think that a bold eulogy from you (if administered immediately) would be of service to me [...][11]

Hogg's failure to retain this high standing in the literary world of Edinburgh must partly be attributed to his fondness for literary experimentation and his refusal to repeat himself. One of the highlights of *The Queen's Wake* is the inset poem of 'Kilmeny', the tale of a pure maiden who is taken body and soul to a 'land of Thought' which in some respects resembles fairyland but as Douglas Mack once indicated also resembles a Christian heaven.[12] If Hogg had been a less ambitious (and less interesting) writer he could have written poems in the 'Kilmeny' vein to great acclaim for the rest of his life, and indeed he was constantly urged to do so, much to his annoyance. On the publication of his Ossianic epic *Queen Hynde* of 1825, for example, Hogg was 'indignantly wroth' when the leader of a party of young friends drinking success to the new work expressed the view that it 'was much inferior to their beloved "Queen's Wake."' (*Memoir*, p. 41). In the first flush of his success in 1813 Hogg seems to have felt that there need be no limit to his literary achievements—he embarked on an ambitious poem in the Spenserian stanza, a tragedy which he hoped to see produced on the stage in London or Edinburgh, and a collection with the Shakespearean title of 'Midsummer Night Dreams'. The chief poem of this collection, *The Pilgrims of the Sun*, published separately in 1815, seems to repeat 'Kilmeny', in that a young and pure maiden is abstracted from earth and taken on a cosmological and other-worldly tour. In the various parts of the poem, though, Hogg, as poet, himself embarks on a journey among the stars, sections of his narrative openly and dangerously aiming to display his virtuosity in the style of Milton, Dryden and Pope, and Scott. In the eyes of his contemporaries this was outrageous presumption on the part of an ill-educated peasant, and evidence that despite the composition of *The Queen's Wake* Hogg was not really in the same class as the more gentlemanly poets of the age.

Confusing the public with respect to his authorship was one means by which Hogg hoped to secure an unprejudiced assessment of his work. In preparing his essay-periodical *The Spy* of 1810–11 Hogg had passed off the essays of Addison and Johnson as his own, and attributed his own work to those masters to test the sincerity of his literary advisors.[13] Anonymity was another device by which he hoped to have his work valued on its own merits rather than

prejudged as the work of a peasant poet. Both Clare and Hogg had a fine ear for the verse of their contemporary poets, for example, and parodied it. Clare's Wordsworth parodies however seem to have been misunderstood by Taylor as unsuccessful copies: Clare protested '[...] do you mistake my imitation of W W [William Wordsworth] as a serious attempt in his manner—twas written in ridicule of his affectations of simplicity—& I had thoughts of imitating the styles of all the living poets [...]' (*Letters*, p. 231). In *The Poetic Mirror* Hogg did produce a collection in which he imitated the styles of living poets, publishing the first edition anonymously, presumably to guard against just such a prejudice as Taylor revealed to Clare. Hogg's parodies of Wordsworth are particularly fine. In 'The Flying Tailor', for example, the Wordsworthian narrative poet reflects

> A pair
> Of breeches to his philosophic eye
> Were not what unto other folks they seem,
> Mere simple breeches, but in them he saw
> The symbol of the soul—mysterious, high
> Hieroglyphics! such as Egypt's Priest
> Adored upon the holy Pyramid, [...]

Another Wordsworth parody, 'The Stranger', builds to a climax at the Lakeland mere in which the eponymous stranger's skeleton has been discovered. As the poet watches, a mysterious form stirs in the depths of the water:

> All Nature stood in mute astonishment,
> As if her pulse lay still—onward it came,
> And hovering o'er the bones, it linger'd there
> In a most holy and impressive guise.
> I saw it shake its hideous form, and move
> Towards my feet—the elements were hush'd,
> The birds forsook their singing, for the sight
> Was fraught with wonder and astonishment.
> It was a tadpole—somewhere by itself
> The creature had been left, and there had come
> Most timeously, by Providence sent forth,
> To close this solemn and momentous tale.[14]

A wonderfully bathetic moment is, literally, *pointed* by a neat typographical joke, the full stop that ends the printing of Hogg's text corresponding visually to the tadpole that ends his tale. Unsurprisingly, given the quality of these parodies, the first edition

of *The Poetic Mirror* published in October 1816 sold with unusual rapidity, and a second edition was produced at the end of the year with an 1817 title-page. By then, though, the Ettrick Shepherd was widely known to be the author and sales accordingly plummeted, a number of copies of the second edition apparently remaining unsold as late as 1821.[15]

Hogg persistently attempted to challenge and manipulate the literary market of Edinburgh, and sometimes that of London too. For example, Peter Garside's edition of Hogg's best-known prose work, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, provides among much else a demonstration of Hogg's successful manipulation of the Longmans firm to ensure that his work appeared in a form that was acceptable to him.[16] His writings as a whole reveal a tendency to restless artistic experimentation that must have been increased by his closeness to the print culture of Edinburgh—among other things he tried his hand at dramas, national tales, women's fiction, sermons, verse parodies and Ossianic epic. His reputation in his own day undoubtedly suffered as a result. What in a member of the prevailing literary establishment might be viewed as a new contribution to a tradition tended to be interpreted in Hogg's case as a peasant's failure to comprehend and to conform to an existing standard.

The marketing potential of his Ettrick Shepherd pseudonym was clearly welcome to Hogg but he often tried to liberate himself from the restrictions it imposed, and with his two-part publication of *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland* in 1819 and 1821, compiled at the invitation of the Highland Society of London, he laid claim to the role of learned editor. A novelist or poet could add a useful aura of scholarship to his reputation by editing ballads or songs, or by writing biography and history. His work was then deemed to have permanent importance rather than just temporary popularity, and he might consequently hope for official patronage. Some of the Royal Society of Literature's awards in the 1820s exemplify this rather neatly, in that they seem to have been given to well-known poets under the pretext of distinguishing other parts of their published work. Robert Southey, for example, was awarded a gold medal in 1827 as 'Author of the History of Brazil, & of several other distinguished Works in English Literature', while William Roscoe in 1829 was granted his 'for his lives of Lorenzo di Medici & Leo the Tenth and other publications'. Even in the case of Scott his novels and poems were praised as 'Illustrations of the Manners, Antiquities & History of Scotland'.[17] In *Jacobite Relics* Hogg attempted to

occupy the controlling position that Scott had enjoyed in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, journeying into remote areas of Scotland, collecting Jacobite songs, drawing upon the manuscript materials of his literary friends, and publishing what was to become the standard nineteenth-century collection of Jacobite song. At the time many reservations were expressed as to Hogg's ability to compile and edit such a work, and on publication it was criticised as an indiscriminate collection, the authenticity of many individual songs being denied altogether. Hogg's work did indeed become the standard nineteenth-century collection of Jacobite song, however, and Murray Pittock in his research towards his Stirling/South Carolina edition, has conclusively demonstrated that songs supposed for many years to be spurious are indeed Jacobite relics.[18] Contemporary undervaluation of Hogg's achievement as an editor had serious financial consequences. When in April 1827 he sounded out William Jerdan, an active member of the Royal Society of Literature, about the possibility of a pension he was firmly informed that the Society was 'rather for the encouragement of learning than of that kind of Literature which may be sustained by making itself popular; and therefore, Authors of works requiring great labours and deep research [...] come more distinctly within its sphere than Authors of works of fancy and imagination'.[19] There was to be no award to the editor of *Jacobite Relics* and other distinguished works in English literature.

In this context Clare's statement to Hessey of 21 January 1827—'I have been amusing myself latterly in collecting fragments of old Ballads not with any other view than amusement [...]' (*Letters*, p. 391)—may represent a wise refusal to enter an arena where he was sure to be worsted. Significantly, Clare had recently been reading the learned editorial production of another peasant poet, a copy of Allan Cunningham's collection of *The Songs of Scotland* (1825) presented to him by Taylor. Writing to thank him for this gift on 1 December 1826 Clare described it as follows:

> I most heartily thank you for all favors especially for the Scotch Songs which I longed anxiously to see I have just dipt into it & seen some of witching beauty whose names I never heard of before—the notes Introduction &c are in my opinion too long & plentiful they are full of Scotch kith & kin Scotts and Scotland [...]' (*Letters*, p. 386)

While Clare enjoyed Allan Cunningham's selection of songs, he expresses marked disapproval of the surrounding editorial apparatus,

particularly of its national solidarity. Engaged in *The Songs of Scotland* in a parallel activity to Hogg's collection of *Jacobite Relics* Cunningham does justice to James Hogg within this work. Not only does his concluding section of 'Songs of Living Lyric Poets' in the fourth volume include nine songs of Hogg's own, but his notes to the third volume make frequent reference to *Jacobite Relics* itself, which is then listed in his 'Conclusion' as one of the most important of all Scottish national song collections:

> Five Collections seem to deserve the particular attention of all who wish to acquire an intimate knowledge of national song—those of Allan Ramsay, David Herd, James Johnson, George Thomson, and James Hogg.[20]

Could Clare's comment on his ballad collecting in January hide a fleeting desire to join the company of peasant poets turned learned editors? Or does it indicate disapproval of the Scottish poets Hogg and Cunningham for having wandered from the ground of lyric poetry onto that of learned editing? It is striking that, despite his miserable poverty, Clare kept his distance from the literary world of London and showed a massive and remarkable fidelity to his vision of himself as lyric poet. In his letter to Eliza Emmerson of 1 August 1829, for example, Clare indicates that he is well aware of the financial advantages of turning to prose but shows no real interest in doing so, even though his admired friend Allan Cunningham is urging him to it:

> [...] most of my friends are desirious for me to attempt somthing in prose as verse will not sell & I am looking round for a subject as Cunningham anxiously urges me to it & he anticipates my success so friendly & earnestly that I have determined *to try* at all events but wether I shall produce a novel or a prayer book I am sure I cannot tell (*Letters*, p. 463)

Clare's wit here reveals his basic indifference to any other role than that of lyric poet. Hogg in his lifetime was repeatedly told by the literary coterie of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and others that the cobbler should stick to his last and that the business of a peasant poet was to write lyric poetry. However, the bowdlerising of Clare's work by editors in his own lifetime is, of course, notorious. Clare's experience amply demonstrates that the peasant poet who *did* confine himself to what was thought to be his most appropriate work

was not regarded as any more competent to understand it or to shape it for popular consumption than the peasant poet who did *not*. Neither writer was ever truly considered by his contemporaries as qualified to be his own editor.

Clare's steady adherence to lyric poetry has perhaps facilitated subsequent appreciation of his work, though, and he is now rightly and generally regarded as one of the greatest nineteenth-century English poets. That relentless experimenter James Hogg, by contrast, is still undervalued and his work is only beginning to emerge in unbowdlerised form within a critical context that is prepared to see its instability as an interesting rather than a blameworthy phenomenon.

NOTES

1. *Letters*, pp. 83–84. Similar use was made of this quotation by Sam Ward in the opening of his article, 'Clare in Fashion', *The John Clare Society Journal* 21 (2002), 33–51. I thank John Goodridge for drawing this article to my attention.
2. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition. In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (London 1759; facsimile edition Leeds, 1966), pp. 12, 17–18.
3. Clare to Edward Bell Drury, [April 1819], in *Letters*, p. 8.
4. James Hogg, *A Series of Lay Sermons on Good Principles and Good Breeding*, edited by Gillian Hughes with Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 103.
5. Clare to Cunningham, 9 September 1824, in *Letters*, pp. 302–3. 'Sighing for Retirement', in *Later Poems*, I, pp. 19–20.
6. Henry Scott Riddell's memoir is in National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS) MS 3115, fols 58–78 (fol. 64). I am grateful to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to refer to manuscript material in their care in the present article.
7. James Hogg, *Memoir of the Author's Life* and *Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott*, edited by Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh and London, 1972), p. 62 (hereafter referred to as *Memoir*).
8. Scott to Surtees, 21 February 1807, in *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, edited by H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols (London, 1932–37), I, p. 356.
9. Mrs Garden, *Memorials of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd* (Paisley, undated), p. 73.
10. For this and other details of Hogg's relationship with James Gray see *The Spy*, edited by Gillian Hughes (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 562–3.
11. Wilson to Hogg, September [1815], in Mrs Gordon, *'Christopher North': A Memoir of John Wilson*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1862), I, p. 198.
12. In his Introduction to James Hogg, *Selected Poems* (Oxford, 1970), pp. xxii–xxvi.
13. For a discussion of this see *The Spy*, edited by Gillian Hughes (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. xxxii–xxxiii.
14. *The Poetic Mirror* (London and Edinburgh, 1816), pp. 168 and 152–3.

15. *The Poetic Mirror* is included among a list of works published in Edinburgh in *Scots Magazine*, 78 (October 1816), 733, while a similar list for December on p. 934 includes the second edition of the work. Hogg's letter to George Boyd of 5 May 1821 partly concerns itself with the disposal of unsold copies of the second edition—see NLS Accession 5000/188, Special Correspondence Box, Oliver and Boyd Papers.
16. See *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justifed Sinner*, edited by P. D. Garside (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. lvii–lviii. This is part of the ongoing Stirling / South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (Edinburgh, 1995–).
17. See the accounts of General Meetings of 26 April 1827 and 7 May 1829, in the manuscript volume of 'General Meetings of the Royal Society of Literature' for 1823 onwards, owned by the Royal Society of Literature. I am grateful to the Royal Society of Literature for permission to quote from this volume in the present article.
18. Murray Pittock, 'The Dating of the *Jacobite Relics*', *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 4 (1994), 20–28. See also the Introduction and Notes to James Hogg, *Jacobite Relics* [First Series], edited by Murray G. H. Pittock (Edinburgh, 2000).
19. William Jerdan to Hogg, 30 April 1827, in NLS MS 2245, fols 98–9.
20. See Allan Cunningham, *The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and Modern; with An Introduction and Notes, Historical and Critical, and Characters of the Lyric Poets*, 4 vols (London, 1825), IV, p. 360.

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