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Rural Medicine: Robert Bloomfield's 'Good Tidings'

I

Edward Jenner, a Gloucestershire doctor, first introduced vaccination against smallpox during the 1790s. His discovery attracted the attention of a number of poets during the first decade of the nineteenth century. In the same year that Robert Bloomfield addressed the subject in 'Good Tidings; or, News From the Farm' (1804), John Williams produced a poem entitled 'Ode to the Discoverer of Vaccination'. This represented Jenner's discovery as a biblical battle against evil. Later in his 'Ode to Jenner' (1810), a poem which was more about the ongoing war with France, Christopher Anstey likened the destructive power of smallpox to the danger posed by French imperialism. Other better known poets were also drawn to the theme. Robert Southey wrote a favourable review of 'Good Tidings' for the *Annual Review*, and in a letter to Jenner written in 1810, Samuel Taylor Coleridge declared his intention to write a poem on the subject which he had 'convinced … [himself] … [was] capable in the highest degree of being poetically treated, according to our divine bard's own definition of poetry, as "*simple*, *sensuous* (i.e. appealing to the senses, by imagery, sweetness of sound, &c.) *and impassioned*"'.[1] Typically his plans never came to fruition. Bloomfield's poetic response is the only one written by a prominent poet, and the only one which ostensibly has as its principal object the promotion of smallpox vaccination. In some ways it also achieves the poetic aims that Coleridge set for himself six years later.

At the time that 'Good Tidings' was first published, Bloomfield, a London shoemaker, was still at the peak of his popularity as a poet following the success of *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) and *Rural Tales, Ballads and Songs* (1802).[2] 'Good Tidings' is a long poem of about four hundred lines; it is written in rhyming couplets, and combines a number of different poetic modes including the narrative verse tale, the autobiographical lyric, the pastoral lyric and the didactic propaganda poem. It was originally

published as a separate volume, but did not sell well and never won a wide audience. This disappointed Bloomfield because the poem had a particular message to convey, and he wanted it to reach as many people as possible. He 'improved' it for his collection, *Wild Flowers; or, Pastoral and Local Poetry* (1806). Most of the textual changes that he made for the new volume do not appear to have resulted from a desire to alter the meaning of the poem or increase its power to affect. It seems that he wished to improve the quality of the poetry.[3] The poem fits well into *Wild Flowers* because two other poems in the volume also treat the matter of health. 'Shooter's Hill' quite conspicuously concerns the struggle to recover health by re-establishing some kind of natural balance, and 'To My Old Oak Table' partly concerns the pain and turmoil that illness brings to a labouring man and his family. 'Good Tidings' is also about the search for health, but it approaches the question from a different perspective; it explicitly and didactically engages with the science of human illness. The poem is important because it represents an idiosyncratic intervention within what had become an acrimonious debate regarding the efficacy of two alternative approaches to smallpox prevention. This essay aims to demonstrate that Bloomfield's labouring-class origin had a significant impact upon the manner in which he engaged in this debate. It is divided into two parts; the first explores the difficulties that confronted the poet following his decision to write a poem upon this topic. The second examines the manner in which Bloomfield approaches his defence of vaccination in the poem itself, and how his promotion of the practice ultimately enables him to demonstrate both the healing power of nature, and the fact that folk or popular science often has an unacknowledged but nonetheless significant impact upon the development of experimental science.

In some respects it is easy to see why the introduction of smallpox vaccination provoked such an impassioned debate; to many people it would have seemed an unusual and threatening procedure. It involved taking matter from a human cowpox pustule located on the body of the donor, and then transferring it to a healthy person by making a small incision, usually in the arm, and inserting a small amount of the liquid using a lancet. This resulted in protection against smallpox, and matter from the pustule which formed on the recipient's body could then be used to vaccinate others. Previously the only protection against smallpox had been variolation with matter from a smallpox pustule. This generally caused a very mild form of the disease and resulted in protection for life: variolation was brought back from Constantinople by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1721.[4] The major problem with this method was that a significant number of those variolated developed the full blown disease; it was estimated that

about one in fifty died after variolation. Notwithstanding this fact its supporters argued that whereas variolation resulted in immunity for life, vaccination did not achieve life-long protection.

With the benefit of hindsight we can now say that the anti-vaccinists were correct, and that Jenner and some of his supporters, who argued that vaccine inoculation did result in life-long protection, were wrong. Of course, many of those who opposed vaccination were not motivated by such humanitarian concerns. Many committed anti-vaccinists had a vested financial interest in the continuing use of variolation. The bulk of the evidence, however, did suggest that vaccination was much safer than variolation, and it was probably due to their inability to win a more reasoned argument that some anti-vaccinists began to resort to shock tactics that played upon pre-existing fears. Their campaign resulted in the dissemination of increasingly alarmist material such as Benjamin Mosely's account of a young boy who had been vaccinated and later began to develop 'on his back and loins patches of hair; not resembling his own hair, for that was of a light colour, but brown, and of the same length, and quality, as that of a Cow'.[5] William Rowley suggested that vaccine inoculation would damage people's marriage prospects: 'Who would marry into any family, at the risk of their offspring having filthy *beastly diseases*?'[6] Caricatures of people with bovine characteristics, or, as in James Gillray's *The Cow Pock* (1808), with calves emerging from various bodily orifices, or bursting through the skin, also began to appear.

II

Even before he began work upon 'Good Tidings', Bloomfield's status as a labouring-class poet presented him with a number of difficulties. One pressing problem arose out of the poet's negotiations with patronage. Despite the fact that he did not seek patronage from him, he must have been concerned that Jenner would appropriate the role of patron for himself.[7] In 1802, when the first version of the poem was written, this was probably the last thing that Bloomfield would have wanted. He was already embroiled in a dispute with Capel Lofft, his first and most important patron, over the manner in which his work should be presented.[8] In 1798, after the poet had unsuccessfully endeavoured to find a publisher for *The Farmer's Boy*, he sent the manuscript to his mother in his home village of Honington, Suffolk. Lofft was known in the area both as a friend of the poor and as a literary figure. Bloomfield's brother George took the manuscript to him at his home in Trotson and asked for his opinion of the poem. Lofft was impressed; after he had 'corrected' it he managed to get the poem published by Vernor and Hood, and it was an overnight sensation. Lofft

had included his own lengthy preface in the first edition, and he added an ever increasing amount of paratextual matter to later editions. Eventually Bloomfield became unhappy about the intrusive nature of much of this material, and endeavoured to gain more control over his work. The poet was in a difficult situation because he felt a great deal of gratitude for Lofft's assistance, and was confused regarding the degree of authority he might claim over his own work, as he remarks in a letter written in 1801: 'I do not pretend to know how strong a negative in any case my author's prerogative ought to give me.'[9]

Despite the fact that Bloomfield still felt under some kind of obligation to defer to patrons and to 'friends' who took an interest in his work, the poet's association with Edward Jenner was a more evenly balanced one. Jenner and his discovery needed the kind of positive publicity that a famous poet like Bloomfield could provide. Bloomfield, on the other hand, felt himself obliged to offer assistance in the campaign to achieve the universal acceptance of vaccination. The poet's father had died of small-pox, and in the 'Advertisement' he dwells upon the personal debt which he owed to vaccination: 'I have, in my own, insured the lives of four children by Vaccine Inoculation, who, I trust, are destined to look back upon the Small-pox as the scourge of days gone by' (WF, p. 106). The death of his brother's child whilst he was working on the poem clearly increased the intensity of this feeling, as he reveals in a footnote: 'I had proceeded thus far with the Poem, when the above fact became a powerful stimulus to my feelings, and to the earnestness of my exhortations' (WF, p. 122). He was committed to the cause of vaccination; 'Good Tidings' was 'A task to conscience and to kindred due' (WF, p. 132), and he did not need Jenner in the same way that he had needed Lofft. Bloomfield was nevertheless unsure how to approach his relationship with Jenner, and a letter to George Bloomfield dated 21 July 1802 reveals just how irritating he found his interventions: 'This moment a letter from Dr. Jenner invites me to tea this evening. What shall I do – leave 150 lines of an unfinished subject in his hands? I am bound to consult Mr. Lofft and the Duke [of Grafton], and to submit my pieces to their judgement, and never will do otherwise; and yet it is hard to say *no* in such cases as this. I wish he would suspend his curiosity six months, and I would take my chance' (SC, p. 29). Bloomfield wanted to retain his artistic autonomy; he did not want another patron to interfere with either the text of his poetry or its presentation, as Lofft had done in respect of both *The Farmer's Boy* and *Rural Tales*. He might also have been concerned that Jenner, who was himself deeply involved in the promotion of vaccination, would attempt to control the way in which he constructed his poetic defence. As will become clear, Bloomfield wanted

to defend the practice in a manner that both reflected and distinguished his labouring-class origin, and, at least in part, located it within the healing power of nature.

Perhaps Bloomfield could not avoid the kind of problems that arose out his relationships with patrons, but he had made a conscious choice to address a scientific subject, and this decision presented him with other difficulties. The first was the fact that, as is clear from the number of writers who were attracted to the same theme, he was not on his own in grappling with material of this kind. More importantly, other prominent poets had treated scientific subjects. Capel Lofft had published *Eudosia: or a Poem on the Universe* in 1780; this is a long blank-verse poem in seven books which displays his considerable knowledge of natural science, cosmology and botany. Although *Eudosia* anticipates the poetry of Erasmus Darwin in the way it attempts to merge natural science and poetry, Darwin himself was the more influential figure. *The Botanic Garden* (1789, 1791), *Zoonomania; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794, 1796) and *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society* (1803), whatever their merits as poetry, were landmark works of literature. Poets as different as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats were all influenced by them.[10]

Bloomfield might have had the poetry of Lofft and Darwin in his mind when writing 'Good Tidings', but Wordsworth's statements regarding science and poetry would have been of greater significance to him because the two poets had a similar vision for poetry. Bloomfield had read *Lyrical Ballads* shortly before he began work on 'Good Tidings'; as a consequence he knew that, like himself, Wordsworth had a desire to write poetry that could 'make the incidents of common life interesting', and which was also written in the language of 'these men'.[11] Wordsworth's views regarding the role and value of poetry and science were shaped by his debate with Humphry Davy which was played out in Davy's *A Discourse Introductory* (1802) and in both the 1800 and the 1802 versions of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.[12] In the end they appear to have reached a kind of agreement, but the crucial issue for Wordsworth was that he did not believe new science to be a suitable theme for the kind of poetry which he wished to write. Wordsworth did not believe that the general mass of humankind discussed new scientific discoveries, unless they started to impact upon their day to day lives. Even then it was the practical effect of the discovery that interested them; or rather what that effect was perceived to be and how they felt about it. This is why in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he concludes that:

> The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective Sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.[13]

Bloomfield also recognized potential difficulties in addressing the matter of scientific discovery in poetry: 'To those few who know that I have employed my thoughts on the importance of Dr. JENNER'S discovery, it has generally and almost unexceptionally appeared a subject of little promise; peculiarly unfit indeed for poetry' (WF, p. 106). He continued to be reminded of this fact after the publication of the first edition. The *Poetical Register*, for example, remarked that the subject of vaccination 'could never be rendered attractive', but did conclude that 'what could be done Mr Bloomfield has done'.[14] Bloomfield believed that he had found an approach which circumvented some of the difficulties of which both he and others were clearly aware. His solution was to limit the poem to the realm of domestic affairs; in the 'Advertisement' he asserts that he has found 'a method of treating' the subject which has 'endeared it' to him because 'it indulges in domestic anecdote' (WF, p. 106). He is alluding to only part of the truth here because, although the poem does 'indulge in domestic anecdote', this is not all it does. In fact a careful reading of 'Good Tidings' reveals it to be a poem which operates on a number of quite different levels.

Notwithstanding the fact that it does not tell the whole truth about 'Good Tidings', the real significance of Bloomfield's assertion is that it suggests a way in which the poet believed he had circumvented the difficulties posed by Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's view that new scientific discoveries did not interest the general mass of humankind and were therefore not an appropriate subject for poetry would have been of concern to Bloomfield because he wanted to treat the subject of vaccination while staying in touch with his rural labouring-class origin. The answer to this problem lay in the fact that smallpox was a particular scourge upon the poor. They generally lived in closer proximity to each other than did the more fortunate members of society, and a large number of people would often share a small living space. This was especially true in the towns, but in the countryside too the poor were more exposed to the spread of the disease. Despite their greater exposure to infection, however, they were also more likely to survive the

disease. In the seventeenth century Thomas Sydenham had argued that this was because the best treatment for smallpox was none at all, and the poor were unable to afford the prevailing treatments involving warmth, heavy blankets, the exclusion of light and air and a diet rich in bread and hot drinks.[15] Even if an individual survived smallpox he or she would usually be disfigured for life, and Bloomfield saw vaccination as a solution which would have an immediate observable impact upon the day to day 'domestic' lives of the poor. In this way, although his theme was science, the poet could regard vaccination as a new discovery which was 'manifestly and palpably material' to the poor 'as enjoying and suffering beings'.[16] As a consequence he could treat the theme, while remaining true to his simple rural muse.

Even if he could persuade himself that vaccination was an appropriate subject for poetry, Bloomfield also knew that 'Good Tidings' might expose him to personal criticism specifically because of his labouring-class background. In their article 'The Jenneration of Disease: Vaccination, Romanticism, and Revolution' Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee assert that he had the autobiographical passages in mind when he apologized for 'the egotism, so conspicuous in the poem' (WF, p. 106).[17] This is unlikely because 'To My Old Oak Table', for which he felt no need to apologize, is more intensely and revealingly autobiographical than 'Good Tidings'. Moreover, apart from referring to 'the practice of talking about oneself or one's doings', at the turn of the eighteenth century the word 'egotism' could also mean 'the vice of thinking too much of oneself; self-conceit, boastfulness'.[18] In making this remark it is therefore more likely that Bloomfield was concerned about the fact that, as a labouring-class poet with little formal education, he might appear 'boastful' or presumptuous in pretending to knowledge about the latest developments in medicine and the resultant benefits for humankind. His use of William Woodville's *The History of the Inoculation of the Small-Pox in Great Britain* (1796) for the poem's footnotes is significant. In the 'Advertisement' Bloomfield points out that his notes are taken from Woodville because he believes that his reliance upon a history might save him from accusations of affecting scientific knowledge.

III

Once Bloomfield had negotiated his relationship with Jenner and justified his decision to treat a scientific subject, he had next to decide what kind of poem 'Good Tidings' was to be; a decision that had not been fully resolved when he began to write. Fulford and Lee are right to argue that

smallpox threatened his 'muse', but not, as they suggest, because it was being undermined by a disease.[19] The threat of smallpox had been a fact of life in the countryside long before Bloomfield ever thought of writing poetry. His muse was unsettled because he did not know how to address his theme, and as a result 'Good Tidings' is a poem that lays bare the bones and muscles of its making. The opening passages suggest that what follows will be a kind of rural tableau derived from the verse tale. Bloomfield sets the scene for a narrative poem about a 'Blind Child, so admirably fair' (WF, p. 107). The interlocutor-narrator's question 'When was this work of bitterness begun? / How came the blindness of your only son?' (WF, p. 110), however, very quickly signals a transition. After the mother's description of the suffering caused by the smallpox, the poem turns into a meditation upon the benefits to be derived from the as yet unnamed saviour.

The poem's various transformations are brought into greater relief by its shifts of voice and forms of rhetorical address. In the opening passage the speaker is a detached third-person narrator. There is, however, much more immediacy and emotional impact when the fictional voice of the blind child's mother emerges to account for the cause of her son's blindness. Bloomfield is clearly searching for the right narrative voice in the opening passages of 'Good Tidings', and this becomes even more apparent when the narrator's voice re-emerges. A further unsignalled, but significant readjustment takes place at this point. The narrative style is suddenly more intrusive, and the first line of the next passage directly announces that the narrator's commentary is specifically addressed to readers of the poem: 'Now, ye who think, whose souls abroad take wing' (WF, p. 111). Bloomfield evidently felt that greater impact would be achieved by a more impassioned and challenging appeal to his readers' intellect.

The problem of voice in the poem is explicitly foregrounded in the next passage as Bloomfield rejects an appeal to the muse in favour of God and truth: 'Invoke no muse, no power below the skies; / To Heav'n the energies of verse belong, / Truth is the theme, and truth shall be the song' (WF, p. 112). In a kind of self-referential rhetorical strategy, this passage rejects the type of poem that 'Good Tidings' was shaping up to become – a fictional tale full of pathos. This is the signal for another new direction, and, as a first person point of view quietly emerges, the poem turns into a hybrid of autobiography and pastoral:

> Sweet beam'd the star of peace upon those days
> When virtue watch'd my childhood's quiet ways,
> Whence a warm spark of Nature's holy flame

> Gave the farm-yard an honourable name,
> But left one theme unsung (WF, p. 112).

These lines allude to the poet's account of his childhood in *The Farmer's Boy*, a poem that had demonstrated the value of the countryside and the simple rural life; 'Good Tidings' reinforces this message, because, in drawing attention to a medicine derived from 'the blood of kine', it reveals the true fecundity of nature. Later in 'Good Tidings' Bloomfield describes how the smallpox has blighted his brother's family: 'Seven winters cannot pluck from memory's store / That mark'd affliction which a brother bore; / That storm of trouble bursting on his head, / When the fiend came, and left *two children* dead!' (WF, p. 121). The narratorial voice had been shifting towards this from the beginning of the poem. Passion is often moving, but Bloomfield wanted the poem to make a strong impression upon the reader, and does so through the power of direct personal testimony rather than reported evidence.

The most important feature of the poem's first autobiographical section is that it is a pastoral vision of the poet's youth. On this and a number of other occasions 'Good Tidings' does praise rural life, but such passages do not offer the ideal vision of the countryside that Fulford and Lee suggest: 'Vaccination saved Bloomfield's muse because it made the pastoral ideal seem liveable – at least in one poem. It allowed it again to appear rooted in actual rural life.'[20] In the excerpt which they quote in evidence, Bloomfield's memory of the past draws him back to the working countryside in the form of a 'farm-yard'. This cannot really be said to have associations with the pastoral ideal; on the contrary it is bound up with the hard labour that is connected with living off the land, as the following description of a farm-yard from *The Farmer's Boy* graphically demonstrates:

> The clattering Dairy-Maid immers'd in steam,
> Singing and scrubbing midst her milk and cream,
> Bawls out, 'Go fetch the Cows!' … [Giles] hears no more;
> For pigs, and ducks, and turkies, throng the door,
> And sitting hens, for constant war prepar'd.[21]

It would be more just to describe this section of 'Good Tidings' as an elegy for the lost rural innocence of Bloomfield's youth. It praises the simplicity of rural life as well as the 'Virtue' that Bloomfield always associates with this simplicity, and which he felt in danger of losing the longer he dwelt in the city.

In this and the following passage, Bloomfield attempts to link the 'Virtue' of natural rural simplicity and country traditions with scientific

explanation. Jenner's discovery represented evidence that this link was not just a fantasy; it was based upon scientific observation, but it was also essentially a simple discovery which had lain dormant in local folk beliefs about cow pox: 'plain truth tradition seem'd to know, / By simply pointing to the harmless Cow' (WF, p. 114). Within this passage the discovery of vaccine inoculation becomes the joint effort of Jenner and the labouring poor; the repository of rural folklore. Vaccine inoculation is an offering made by rural communities, indeed by the working countryside itself, at the shrine of 'Health' – the second specifically identified addressee to appear in the poem: 'May all the sweets of meadows and of kine / Embalm, O Health! this offering at thy shrine' (WF, p. 113).

Others did not agree that vaccination was an 'offering' at 'the shrine' of health. To express such warm support for Jenner's discovery in 1804 was not to adopt a neutral position because it was during this year that the debate over the efficacy of vaccination began to intensify. Bloomfield responds to the anti-vaccinists by emphasizing the way in which Jenner's conduct and his discovery are both rooted in nature. First he reminds readers of the bestial nature of smallpox (invoked specifically following yet another change of addressee) and of the grip that it had upon the world:

> Momentous triumph – fiend! thy rein is o'er;
> Thou, whose blind rage hath ravaged ev'ry shore,
> Whose name denotes destruction, whose foul breath
> For ever hov'ring round the dart of death,
> Fells, mercilessly fells, the brave and base,
> Through all the kindreds of the human race (WF, p. 115).

This passage goes on to reveal the manner in which smallpox had touched every corner of the globe, from Greenland, or 'the regions of eternal snows', to the New World. Interestingly the spread of smallpox is directly connected with pride and ambition as is ill health generally in both 'Shooter's Hill' and 'To My Old Oak Table'. According to Bloomfield's value system these two passions are perverted and unnatural, and are consequently less prevalent in simple rural communities than in large towns and cities. In 'Good Tidings' the diffusion of the disease is particularly associated with imperialist aspirations:

> The British oak his giant bulk uprears;
> He, in his strength, while toll'd the passing bell,
> Rejoic'd whole centuries as thy victims fell / … /
> Twas thine, while victories claim'd th' immortal lay,

> Through private life to cut thy desperate way;
> And when full power the wond'rous magnet gave
> Ambition's sons to dare the ocean wave,
> Thee, in their train of horrid ills, they drew (WF, p. 116).

These lines are full of ambiguity and strangely unsettling tensions. The nomenclature used to describe martial victories is marked by conventional triumphalism. This is undercut, however, by the contrast between those victories and the swathe 'cut' through the 'private life' of the British people by smallpox. This is a catastrophe which the 'British oak', preoccupied by imperial and colonial distractions, seems to regard with contemptuous indifference. The ignorant brutality of the colonisers is brought into further bleak relief by the reference to the way in which they carry smallpox around the globe along with other nameless 'horrid ills'.

This long passage is balanced by those focusing on Jenner and his discovery, which represent the positive side of Bloomfield's propaganda campaign. On one level he seems to have felt that Jenner himself was in need of some kind of emotive puffery to combat the growing irrationality of the opposition:

> What, when hope triumph'd, what did JENNER feel!
> Where even hope itself could scarcely rise
> To scan the vast, inestimable prize!
> Perhaps supreme, alone, triumphant stood
> The great, the conscious power of doing good,
> The power to will, and wishes to embrace
> Th' emancipation of the human race (WF, p. 114).

Jenner is presented as a uniquely public-spirited figure, and available evidence suggests that he was driven by a desire to do good. He never set out to capitalize on his discovery despite the fact that some of his associates advised him to do so, unlike proponents of variolation such as Robert Sutton and his two sons. Even Jenner's decision to petition parliament for compensation was, it seems, motivated largely by a desire for public recognition in the face of a challenge to the precedence of his discovery. He also felt that the expense of promoting the use of vaccine inoculation had adversely affected his family's financial security.[22] Jenner's conduct is represented as honest and rooted in nature, that of his opponents in ambition and greed. Their motives are marked by an individualism and deviousness which Bloomfield believed took root in the kind of complex human communities that exist in cities and towns.

As Bloomfield clearly realized, it was also necessary to demonstrate that

the material used in the vaccination process was not harmful. His manner of doing this enabled him again to evoke the healing power of folk medicine:

> … who had seen
> In herds that feast upon the vernal green,
> Or dreamt that in the blood of kine there ran
> Blessings beyond the sustenance of man?
> We tread the meadow, and we scent the thorn,
> We hail the day-spring of a summer's morn
> Nor mead at dawning day, nor thymy heath,
> Transcends the fragrance of the heifer's breath (WF, p. 112).

By implicitly connecting the 'blood' and the 'breath' of 'kine' with the simple odours in nature Bloomfield is responding to the grotesque imagery employed by the opponents of vaccine inoculation. This passage obscures the bestial nature of the cow to focus upon the unthreatening environment of the flower meadow, where the cows' breath mingles with other more pleasing scents. In the Bloomfield's pasture the cow's breath even becomes a 'dear fragrance' to adorn and make the body more attractive, rather than promote a bestial transmutation of the human form.

In the context of his attitude to city life, Bloomfield's celebration of the 'heifer's breath' may be more than simply a poeticism. During the late eighteenth century many medical practitioners believed in pythogenic, or miasmic theory which held that all disease was due to bad air.[23] It was a belief that was also disseminated amongst the population in general. Bloomfield may be contrasting the sweet, and, as had been proven by Jenner's discovery, purifying breath of the heifer with the choking fumes which covered towns and cities. Jenner himself had made a connection between disease and the multifarious nature of human lives in the opening passage of *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae* (1798), although here he is specifically referring to the domestication of wild animals: 'The deviation of Man from the state in which he was originally placed by Nature seems to have proved to him a prolific source of Diseases.'[24] As in 'Shooter's Hill' and 'To My Old Oak Table', illness is again traced back to the town in 'Good Tidings'. The origin of the 'Blind child's' disability is directly located in the town: 'When last year's corn was green upon the ground: / From yonder town infection found its way' (WF, p. 110). When the passage is read in this light vaccine inoculation is more than simply an offering made by the countryside at the shrine of health. It is a further example of the healing power possessed by the countryside in general: 'For who will say, in Nature's wide domain / There lurk not

remedies for every pain?' (WF, p. 125). An obvious reinvigoration results from imbibing the fragrance of meadow flowers, but if this regenerative power extends even to less obvious sources like the mouth of the heifer it might be found anywhere.

At this time earth sciences – geology, geography and meteorology – were intimately linked to the biomedical sciences – physiology, biology and hygiene – and played a vital role in attempts to explain human disease, most prominently in the writings of figures such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck or Constantin Volney.[25] The connection between environment and human health was something that both Bloomfield and prominent scientific thinkers of the time perceived. Throughout his poetry, but particularly in 'Shooters Hill', 'To My Old Oak Table' and 'Good Tidings', the reader senses the degree to which Bloomfield believed in the powerful nature of this link. A number of images in 'Shooters Hill' are also suggestive of another belief instinctively held by the poet: that nature is a medicine chest of remedies for all human ills. The particular significance of Jenner's discovery for Bloomfield, however, is that vaccination represented tangible evidence of the power, fecundity and abundance of the healing power to be found in the countryside

This revelation was clearly important to Bloomfield, but the discovery also had profound poetical significance for him. The second passage on the subject of inspiration towards the end of the poem makes a direct comment upon the treatment of vaccination in pastoral poetry. This passage begins: 'And such a victory, unstain'd with gore, / That strews its laurels at the cottage door, / Sprung from the farm, and from the yellow mead, / Should be the glory of the pastoral reed.' (WF, p. 131). Bloomfield is saying distinctly that his vision for pastoral is one which is rooted in the actuality of life in the countryside. Vaccine inoculation was a rural product which would impinge directly upon the lives of country people. At the same time it united rural life and traditions with science. The real beauty of such a unification for Bloomfield was the fact that it enabled him to invert the pastoral tradition and make it work for the future rather than the past. He envisages a more ideal, though not perfect countryside:

> In village paths, hence, may we never find
> Their youth on crutches, and their children blind;
> Nor, when the milk-maid, early from her bed,
> Beneath the may-bush that embow'rs her head,
> Sings like a bird, e'er grieve to meet again
> The fair cheek injur'd by the scars of pain;
> Pure, in her morning path, where'er she treds,

> Like April sunshine and the flow'rs it feeds,
> She'll boast new conquests; Love, new shafts to fling;
> And life, an uncontaminated spring (WF, p. 131).

It is not possible to say whether 'Good Tidings' helped to promote the widespread use of vaccination, although, as this essay attempts to show, it is a poem that cleverly attempts to persuade readers of its point of view in a number of different ways. This is revealed through the manipulation of voices and modes of writing within the poem as Bloomfield struggles to fit his art to his message. But it is not the message that makes 'Good Tidings' a special poem; this essay has demonstrated how Bloomfield binds the discovery of vaccination to the culture and traditions of rural labouring people, and to the vigour and fecundity of nature's healing power; two things that remained of great importance to him throughout his life. Bloomfield thus provides a counter point to the view that new science only results from work conducted by educated and isolated individuals or small groups who make their discoveries within a cultural vacuum. ℜ

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NOTES

1. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), VI, p. 1025.
2. *The Farmer's Boy* went through seven editions and sold more than 26,000 copies in less than three years.
3. For example, the couplet 'And when at length the wondrous magnet gave / Th' ambitious wings to cross the western wave' (Robert Bloomfield, *Good Tidings; or, News From the Farm* (London: Printed for Vernor and Hood, 1804), p. 21) becomes the slightly less awkward 'And when full power the wond'rous magnet gave / Ambition's sons to dare the ocean wave' (Robert Bloomfield, *Wild Flowers; or, Pastoral and Local Poetry* (London: Printed for Vernor, Hood and Sharpe, 1806), p. 117. All future references to 'Good Tidings' will be from the corrected edition, abbreviated to WF, and will appear within parenthesis in the text). On other occasions lines that he may have felt were superfluous are merely omitted: 'There dwelt, beside a brook that creeps along / Midst infant hills and meads unknown to song, / And alder-groves, and many a flow'ry lea / Still winding onward to the northern sea, / One to whom poverty and faith were giv'n' (Bloomfield, *Good Tidings*, p. 22) becomes 'There dwelt, beside a brook that creeps along / Midst infant hills and meads unknown to song, / One to whom poverty and faith were giv'n' (WF, p. 118). In making such changes it seems unlikely that he was responding to reviews of the 1804 edition because this passage had been specifically praised by Southey in the *Annual Review*: 'These lines may evince that the present publication is not inferior to Robert Bloomfield's former productions' (*Annual Review and History of Literature for 1804*, Vol. III, ed. by Arthur Aikin (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1805), p. 574). Moreover, one review had specifically criticized the language of the poem, remarking that 'in some

instances the author's simplicity degenerates into groveling prose' (*Literary Journal, A Review of Literature, Science, Manners and Politics for the Year 1804*, 3 (1804), p. 671). Bloomfield did not, however, revise the passage which the reviewer cites as an example of this failing.

4. The subject of variolation had also been treated by a labouring-class poet. *Inoculation; or Beauty's Triumph* by Henry Jones was published in 1768. As Bloomfield did vaccination, Jones visualized the discovery as a savior of labouring people. He also praised Robert Sutton, one of the principal proponents of variolation, in extravagant terms that did not take account of his mercenary motives.

5. Dr Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on the Lues Bovilla; or Cow Pox*, 2nd edn (London: Printed by Nichols and Son, 1805), p. 210.

6. William Rowley, *Cow-Pox Inoculation No Security Against Small-Pox Infection* (London: Printed for the Author by J. Barfield, 1805), p. vi.

7. It is not possible to say when Bloomfield came to know Jenner, but they met on several occasions and also corresponded with each other. Jenner took a considerable interest in the composition of 'Good Tidings'.

8. Bloomfield had originally wanted to call his poem about variolae vaccination 'The Vaccine Rose', but at Lofft's suggestion he changed the title to *Good Tidings; or, News from the Farm*.

9. *Selections from the Correspondence of Robert Bloomfield: The Suffolk Poet*, ed. by W.H. Hart, FSA (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1870; repr. Walton-on-Thames: Robert F. Ashby, FLA, 1968), p. 12. All future references will be from this edition, abbreviated to SC, and will appear within parenthesis in the text.

10. See Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

11. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edn, ed. by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 244 and p. 245. In the prefaces to *Rural Tales* and *Wild Flowers* Bloomfield defended his decision to write poetry about the labouring poor of the countryside in language that was free from ornate poetic diction.

12. See Roger Sharrock, 'The Chemist and the Poet: Sir Humphry Davy and the Preface to Lyrical Ballads', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 17 (1962), pp. 57–76.

13. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edn, p. 260.

14. *Poetical Register and Repository of Fugitive Poetry for 1804* (London: Printed for F. and C. Rivington, 1806), p. 498.

15. Richard B. Fisher, *Edward Jenner: 1749–1823* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 17.

16. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edn, p. 260.

17. Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee, 'The Jenneration of Disease: Vaccination, Romanticism, and Revolution', *Studies in Romanticism*, 39 (2000), pp. 139–63 (p. 150).

18. OED, 2nd edn.

19. Fulford and Lee, 'The Jenneration of Disease', p. 151.

20. Fulford and Lee, 'The Jenneration of Disease', p. 152.

21. Robert Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, ed. by John Lucas and John Goodridge (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1998), p. 6.

22. See Fisher, *Edward Jenner*, pp. 113–31.

23. F.F. Cartwright, *A Social History of Medicine* (London and New York: Longman, 1977), p. 97.

24. Edward Jenner, *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccine* (London:

Printed for the Author by Sampson Low, 1798), p. 1.
25. Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Earth Sciences and Environmental Medicine: The Synthesis of the Late Enlightenment', in *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*, 2nd edn, ed. by Ludmilla Jordanova and Roy Porter (London: British Society for the History of Medicine, 1997), p. 127. See also Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed: Gender, Science and Medicine 1760–1820* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 131–42.