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Otaheite, Natural Genius and Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy*

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In a letter written to Capel Lofft shortly after the publication of *The Farmer's Boy* (1800), the Duke of Grafton remarked 'I have to thank you for the acquaintance of a real untaught genius, starting from our neighbourhood; which together with the account you give of his moral character, makes me very desirous of being of service to him.'¹ During the second half of the eighteenth century polite readers like the Duke of Grafton were fascinated by untaught genius. This interest was sparked by the publication of Stephen Duck's georgic poem 'The Thresher's Labour' in 1730. Subsequently, as John Goodridge's three-volume anthology, *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1800* (2003) demonstrates, a large number of such poets were 'discovered' by patrons, and encouraged to publish their work. The second half of the eighteenth century also saw the discovery or exploration of several South-Sea islands. The accounts of these places generated as much if not more interest than labouring-class poets. The island of Otaheite, for example, was regarded by many as primitive, but polite observers were also fascinated by what they saw as the utopian and paradisaical way of life of the islanders.

This essay will examine polite society's response to south-sea islanders – in particular

the Otaheiteans – and labouring-class poets. It will argue that the response to both was driven by the same idea of a relationship between a lack of access to education and elite culture, and some kind of reconnection with the classical Golden Age. As manifestations of the noble savage, Otaheiteans and labouring-class poets were, in a sense, conduits in this process of reconnection.² The essay will focus on the publication of the shoemaker Robert Bloomfield's poem *The Farmer's Boy* – a work that quickly became a literary sensation after it was first published in March 1800.³ Bloomfield explicitly linked *The Farmer's Boy* to the discourse generated by the exploration of Otaheite in a way that fed into, and in many ways reinforced polite ideas about labouring-class poets and their work. Bloomfield invited the connection by including with his poem an appendix describing Otaheite, and taken from what he thought was Cook's journal of his second voyage to the South Seas.⁴ The extract was in fact from Georg Forster's *A Voyage Around the World*, which was first published in 1777, the same year as Cook's own account of his second voyage.⁵ Bloomfield may have mistakenly understood that the passage was from Cook's journal because he extracted it from one of the many parallel reviews of Forster and Cook.⁶ In the end, though, the source of the passage is not material. What matters is that Bloomfield chose to include it at

all in the context of the reception of previous original geniuses like Stephen Duck, James Woodhouse and Ann Yearsley.

A great deal of eighteenth-century thinking on original or natural genius was derived from the 'rediscovery' of Homeric and later Ossianic primitivism. This is the idea that the art and literature produced by classical civilisations owed its beauty and power to the absence of those social and cultural conventions that structure modern societies. At the beginning of the century, in *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison wrote: 'Many of these great natural Genius's that were never disciplined and broken by the Rules of Art, are to be found among the Ancients.'⁷ Edward Young, in perhaps the most important British treatise on natural genius, also stresses the distinction between genius and learning: 'As Riches are most wanted where there is least Virtue; so Learning where there is least Genius. As Virtue without much Riches can give Happiness, so Genius without much Learning can give Renown.'⁸ For Addison and Young a structured education and rules of composition (such as formal and stylistic conventions) are somehow destructive of original or natural genius. But there is more to it than this, because the ancients' ability to produce works of original genius is also rooted in a kind of uncorrupted innocence. It is their child-like nature that produces the society that in turn produces works like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Although Addison and Young did not explicitly associate genius with actual childhood, they did make a metaphorical connection by linking it with what they considered to be the youthful period in human development. The connection between genius and childhood is unambiguously established in William Duff's *Essay on Original Genius* (1767). Indeed it would seem that for Duff childhood or childishness is as much a necessary precondition for genius as lack of education. He writes that imagination, which is

the foundation of genius, is 'peculiarly adapted to the gay, delightful, vacant season of childhood, [and] appears in those early periods in all its puerile brilliance and simplicity, long before the reasoning capacity discovers itself in any considerable degree'.⁹ Duff also remarks that 'one who is born with a Genius for Poetry, will discover a peculiar relish and love for it in his earliest years' (Duff, 37). He then goes on to cite the examples of the Italian poet Tasso, who wrote poetry at the tender age of five, John Milton who began at thirteen or fourteen, and Alexander Pope who began to write poetry at twelve. For Duff, although original genius is in its purest state in antiquity, given the right environment, it can be reproduced in the early stages of the individual (male) human life.

In the context of the prevailing ideas about natural genius it is not difficult to see why there was polite interest in the work of labouring-class poets. The poor were believed by many amongst the more privileged classes to possess the reasoning power of children in any case, and their lack of education confirmed their child-like status. Particularly during the first half of the eighteenth century, this view led to comic portrayals of the stupid and 'vulgar' poor as in John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week* (1714). John Barrell has observed that such accounts 'were greeted as accurate and not at all [seen] as ridiculous representations of rural life; they were even felt to be moving, in their account of the [unlikely] emotions felt by the "vulgar"'.¹⁰ For the labouring poor, the plus side of this unfair stigmatisation is that if they possessed the appropriate poetic faculty, they would be regarded by polite readers as being in a position to access the uncorrupted innocence that enabled the ancients to produce works of genius. Capel Lofft's lengthy preface to the first edition of *The Farmer's Boy* represents Bloomfield as a potential 'untaught genius' by focusing on the poet's humble origin and lack of education. But in later editions Lofft was even more concerned to remind readers that the

poet was an unsophisticated and innocent swain. A supplement, added to the second edition, includes an anecdote concerning the young Bloomfield's arrival in London, apparently based upon information provided by the poet's brother George. According to his brother, when Bloomfield arrived in London, he 'strutted before us, dress'd just as he came from keeping Sheep, Hogs, &c... his shoes fill'd full of stumps in the heels. He, looking about him, slipt up... his nails were unus'd to a flat pavement'.¹¹ Lofft may have wanted to justify his continued patronage of a poet who was now a sought-after celebrity. But he also wanted to remind readers that Bloomfield's genius was entirely natural and original. The poet is represented as a somewhat comical swain who would not be out of place in Gay's *The Shepherd's Week*, but who also possesses an exceptional poetic faculty derived from nature. All of this is meant to elicit the kind of response from polite readers that is epitomised by the Duke of Grafton's excitement at having discovered, in Bloomfield, 'a real untaught genius, starting from our neighbourhood'.

Like labouring-class poets, the Otaheitians and other south-sea islanders were regarded as innocent, uncorrupted by education, and closer to nature. They were also seen as childlike. Georg Forster noted that the gifts which Omai (the Otaheitian brought back to England by Cook in 1774) received from his patrons in polite society, which included 'a portable organ, an electrical machine, a coat of mail, and [a] suit of armour', appealed to his 'childish inclinations' (Forster, i. 11). But such observations did not necessarily have negative connotations, because the Otaheitians' childlike natures also linked them to the primitive origins of human civilisation.¹² In 1790 a universal moral geography noted that 'their life [...] resembles that of the golden age: for they are happy in being simple and innocent. Living in a delightful country, free from care and happy in their ignorance, their appetites are

gratified without being cloyed'.¹³ Some even argued that Otaheite was a manifestation of Eden, or of the Arcadia of classical pastoral poetry.¹⁴ For Edward Young the original genius is produced by nature spontaneously: 'An *Original* [genius] may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*' (Young, 8).¹⁵ In the same way nature miraculously produces all of the Otaheitians' material needs, apparently without the need for labour. After providing a lengthy description of the produce of the island, John Hawkesworth noted that 'all these, which serve the inhabitants for food, the earth produces spontaneously, or with so little culture, that they seem to be exempted from the general curse, that "man should eat his bread in the sweat of his brow."' ¹⁶ Then in 1791 Edward Edwards and George Hamilton remarked that 'what Poetic fiction has painted of Eden, or Arcadia, is here realized, where the earth without tillage produces both food and clothing, the trees loaded with the richest of fruit, the carpet of nature with the most odiferous flowers'.¹⁷ Of course such accounts were very far from the truth. But many early idealised accounts were either based upon observation from shipboard, or were restricted to the area around Matavai Bay where Europeans tended to remain. Early descriptions of Otaheite were also biased towards the experience of the island elite with whom Europeans resided and spent most of their time.¹⁸

Some observers did point out that Otaheite was not perfect. There are numerous occasions within *A Voyage Around the World* when the reader glimpses Georg Forster's disillusion at the unravelling myth of the Otaheitian Golden Age: 'We flattered ourselves with the pleasing fancy of having found at least one little spot in the world, where a whole nation, without being lawless barbarians, aimed at a certain frugal equality in their way of living, and whose hours of enjoyment were justly proportioned to those

of labour and rest. Our disappointment was therefore very great, when we saw a luxurious individual spending his life in the most sluggish inactivity, and without one benefit to society, like the privileged parasites of more civilized climates, fattening on the superfluous produce of the soil, of which he robbed the labouring multitudes' (Forster, i. 165). But such correctives do not alter the fact that most polite readers in the old world saw the noble savage in Otaheitian islanders, and were fascinated by the apparent link between their way of life and the classical Golden Age.

The interest of polite readers in both labouring-class poets and so-called primitive societies like Otaheite was in part a reflection of the power of the noble savage trope in eighteenth-century British and French culture. But it was also driven by a counter-intuitive fascination with the spectacle of a farm worker (shoemaker, pipe-maker or sailor, etc.) who, against all the odds, also produced works of art in the media of high culture. Bloomfield became irritated at intrusions into his privacy by those keen to see, at first hand, the spectacle of a 'real untaught genius' at home. Even some years after his initial celebrity had waned, he complained of 'the unseasonable and *impudend* visits of the vain, and the interested, and the curious, taking up my time, inviting me to Dinner &c &c'.¹⁹ Celebrated labouring-class poets were often aware of the fact that polite society regarded them as something akin to a freak show. Bloomfield certainly was, as is apparent from remarks made in a letter to Capel Lofft written in October 1801: 'I feel my situation to be novel; the world looks at me in that light. I am extremely anxious on that account.'²⁰ When he came to publish the first edition of his poems over which he had complete control, he even attempted to correct Lofft's account of his arrival in London, published nine years earlier: 'Now the strict truth of the case is this; that I came [on 29 June, 1781] in my Sunday Clothes, such as they

were; for I well remember the palpitation of my heart on receiving his [his brother George's] proposals to come to town, and how incessantly I thought of the change I was going to experience: remember well selling my smock frock for a shilling, and slyly washing my best hat in the horse pond, to give it a gloss fit to appear in the meridian of London.'²¹ Given this level of sensitivity and the fact that the stories of Stephen Duck, James Woodhouse and Ann Yearsley should have sounded some kind of warning to Bloomfield, it is strange that he explicitly linked *The Farmer's Boy* to Captain Cook's exploration of Otaheite. If the poem was even moderately successful he would be subjected to the gaze and the curiosity of polite readers, but to suggest a connection of this kind would only serve to reinforce their preconceptions and prejudices.

Mai (or Omai), brought back to England by Cook in October 1774, would have been the most immediately identifiable Otaheitian for the majority of British people.²² He was received by polite society as a quasi labouring-class subject in a way that should have worried Bloomfield, particularly in view of the poet's experience of celebrity status on publication of the first edition of *The Farmer's Boy*. Omai was feted in the way that Bloomfield himself would be during the months after the publication of *The Farmer's Boy*. To the surprise of polite society, Omai's manners were found to be genteel. Samuel Johnson compared the manners of Constantine Phipps, Lord Mulgrave, unfavourably with those of the Otaheitian and noted that 'there was . . . little of the savage in Omai'.²³ Frances Burney remarked that Omai 'appears in a *new world* like a man who had all his life studied *the Graces*, and attended with unremitting application and diligence to form his manners, and to render his appearance and behaviour *politely easy*, and thoroughly *well bred*!'²⁴ On the other hand, Johnson did appear to think that Omai had developed his good manners through

his contact with polite society in England, and remarked that 'all . . . [he] has *acquired* of our manners was genteel' (Boswell, 723, my italics). However he developed them, it seems that Omai's politely genteel manners rendered him worthy of notice. By way of contrast, Cook, whose father had been a day-labourer, was regarded as awkward and uncomfortable in polite company. According to Frances Burney, Cook was 'well-mannered and perfectly unpretending; but studiously wrapped up in his own purposes and pursuits; and apparently under a pressure of mental fatigue when called upon to speak, or stimulated to deliberate, upon any other'.²⁵ Patrons and readers were similarly obsessed with the manners and pretensions of 'untaught geniuses'. Like Cook, labouring-class poets were expected to be 'unpretending' and it helped if they had genteel manners. Capel Lofft reassured readers of *The Farmer's Boy* that the poet had 'amiable' manners and was uninterested in any 'fame' or 'advantage' that he might derive from the publication of his poem (p. xix). In other words, he could be admitted (temporarily) to polite company and did not have a desire to rise above his station in life.

One of the most famous assessments of the value of labouring-class poets was made by Samuel Johnson. According to Boswell, Johnson remarked of James Woodhouse: 'it was all vanity and childishness: . . . such objects were, to those who patronised them, mere mirrors of their own superiority. "They had better (said he,) furnish the man with good implements for his trade, than raise subscriptions for his poems"' (Boswell, 443–4). But Johnson's was not an isolated view. Labouring-class poets were regularly, and contradictorily, condemned as being incapable of sustaining a career in the polite domain of letters at the same time as they were celebrated as natural or original geniuses. An obituary published in the *Monthly Magazine*, shortly after the poet's death in 1823, argued that: 'The world would

have lost nothing by the non-appearance of the Farmer's Boy, as it then existed in Bloomfield's original manuscript [before it was edited by Capel Lofft], and the poet would have enjoyed the comforts of an industrious life, enhanced by his love of the Muses.'²⁶

The question of how Omai could or should be assisted by his English friends was similarly a moot point for many observers. When the time came for Omai to return to his native land much was made of the assortment of gifts which he received from his patrons. According to the editor of *Omaiah's Farewell; Inscribed to the Ladies of London* 'Omai . . . [was] returning to his native isle, fraught by Royal order with squibs, crackers, and a various assortment of fireworks, to show to the wild untutored Indian the great superiority of an enlightened Christian prince'.²⁷ Of course this remark is meant to be a reflection upon the shallow nature of English polite society. But it also reflects upon Omai, who, like so many labouring-class poets, is apparently dazzled by the superficial glamour of polite society. Cook later noted that from 'being much caressed in England, [Omai had] lost sight of his original condition'.²⁸ The observations of the anonymous editor of *Omaiah's Farewell* imply that, like Woodhouse, Omai would have been better served if he had been furnished with useful objects. Indeed both Cook and Forster remark with satisfaction upon the fact that Omai did not go completely unprovided with items that might help him to re-establish himself in a reassuringly lowly and pastoral position on his return to Otaheite. Cook expressed confidence that Omai would 'endeavour to bring to perfection the various fruits and vegetables we planted, which will be no small acquisition' but believed that 'the greatest benefit these islands are likely to receive from Omaiah's travels, will be the animals that have been left upon them' (Cook, ii. 110). Forster even hoped that the animals might 'hereafter be conducive, by many

intermediate causes, to the improvement of [the islander's] intellectual faculties' (Forster, i. 12).

In the eyes of his British patrons, Omai's return to Otaheite on 12 August 1777 was not as successful as they had hoped it would be. His demonstration of horse riding skills and British firearms failed to impress the watching British sailors (Fulford, Lee and Kitson, 60). Others worried that Omai would not be able to settle back into life on Otaheite. For example, William Cowper criticised Omai's treatment in *The Task* (1785) where, according to Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson, he 'imagines Omai as a rustic isolated by a brief taste of city civilization and by the consciousness of difference which that taste produces' (Fulford, Lee and Kitson, 63). Cowper's Omai has forfeited his natural simplicity by his visit to London, and is no longer able to relate to his fellow islanders, but he is not like a native Londoner either. He spends his days wishing for what cannot be:

[...] ev'ry morn
Thou climb'st the mountain top, with
eager eye
Exploring far and wide the wat'ry waste
For sight of ship from England. Every
speck
Seen in the dim horizon, turns thee pale
With conflict of contending hopes and
fears.
But comes at last the dull and dusky eve,
And sends thee to thy cabin, well-prepar'd
To dream all night of what the day
denied.²⁹

In this way Omai's experience is made to mirror that of labouring-class poet-sensations corrupted, or rather spoiled, by celebrity.

The idea that labouring-class poets found it difficult to relate to their former friends is not wholly imaginary. Bloomfield and later John Clare felt a growing distance between themselves and those with whom they had previously had an easy understanding. In a revealing passage in the preface to the 1809

edition of his poems, Bloomfield remarks of a visit to Whittlebury Forest at the invitation of the Duke of Grafton: 'When I was at Wakefield Lodge I conceived that I saw the workmen and neighbours look at me as an idle fellow. I had nothing to do but to read, look at them, and their country and concerns. They did not seem to know how to estimate me.'³⁰ As it turned out though, things were not quite as difficult for Omai as Cowper imagined. His demonstration had impressed the inhabitants of Huaheine, who soon sought his advice concerning their desire to conquer the islands of Ulieta and Bora-bora. Omai's British weaponry won the day, but he did not live long to enjoy his triumph and died of natural causes shortly after the victory (Fulford, Lee and Kitson, 67–8).

Polite society's response to labouring-class poets and south sea islanders was clearly complex and in many ways contradictory. Both were celebrated as something special and out of the ordinary at the same time as they were condemned as inferior. Polite readers were fascinated by the spectacle of natural geniuses and south-sea islanders who were not tainted by the perceived corruption of western civilisation, but also needed reassurance that they were still socially and intellectually superior. Just including the passage from *A Voyage Around the World* linked Bloomfield's poem to a complex network of associations that reinforced the representation of him as a typical 'untaught genius' by Capel Lofft. Of course the poet had no idea of the content of Lofft's preface when he made the decision to include the Forster extract in an appendix. He was not consulted over the preparation of the text of *The Farmer's Boy*, and, as he points out in the preface to the 1809 edition of his poems, he did not even know it had been published until his 'brother Nathaniel [...] called to say that he had seen, in a shop window, a book called *The Farmer's Boy*, with a motto'. Bloomfield goes on to say that 'I told him I supposed it must be mine; but I knew nothing of the motto: and I

the more believed it to be mine, having just received through the hands of Mr Lofft a request to wait on the Duke of Grafton, in Piccadilly'.³¹

Bloomfield's report of his discussion with Nathaniel concerning the publication of *The Farmer's Boy* seems to accord with the idea, promoted by Lofft, that he is a typical subservient labouring-class poet. His remarks do not suggest that he was particularly concerned at the manner in which Lofft had cut him out of the copy-editing and production process. But we know that the poet could be, and had been, very assertive when he believed Lofft was not acting in his best interests (White, 90–101). In fact the decision to include the Forster extract with the first edition of his poem represents an early example of Bloomfield's social and poetical confidence. This is because he does not simply include it without direction to his readers. He explicitly links the Forster extract to a particular passage in his poem in a way that, as he must have been aware, radicalises *The Farmer's Boy*. In a letter written in May 1804 Bloomfield claims that he has 'four years past made a determination to be neutral in Politicks and Religion' and argues that 'if perfect Republicanism be not a dream, its durability is'.³² Later in his life he would be even more explicit in his condemnation of radicalism: 'Cobbett and Hunt are men whom I would not trust with power; they are too eager to obtain it.—Universal suffrage is an impracticable piece of nonsense;—Republicanism will only do in *new* establishd countrys: not in those which have been govern'd by Kings for a thousand years.'³³ But Tim Fulford suggests that Bloomfield 'refused to become involved in radical writing and publishing, not necessarily through lack of sympathy but because radicals' forthright and frank avowals seemed to him too exclusive of doubt, deference and ambiguity, too easily certain and too egotistic'.³⁴ On the evidence of *The Farmer's Boy*, when read alongside the

Forster extract, it is clear that Fulford has a point. Bloomfield certainly questions the privileges and prejudices that underpinned the treatment of labouring-class poets by polite society in general, and patrons (like Lofft) and reviewers in particular. The remainder of this essay will focus on the way in which the inclusion of the Forster extract transforms *The Farmer's Boy*. The poem has generally been read as quietist and supportive of the status quo, but the poet's direction to his readers indicates that he wanted it to be taken very differently.

Bloomfield prefaces the Forster extract with a very short citation from 'Summer': 'Destroys life's intercourse; the social plan' (l. 341). Within the poem itself, this line occurs in a passage that, even without reference to the Forster extract, troubled reviewers:

Such were the days, . . . of days long past
 I sing,
 When Pride gave place to mirth without
 a sting;
 Ere tyrant customs strength sufficient
 bore
 To violate the feelings of the poor;
 To leave them distanc'd in the mad'ning
 race,
 Where'er Refinement shews its hated
 face:
 Nor causeless hated; 'tis the peasant's
 curse,
 That hourly makes his wretched station
 worse;
 Destroys life's intercourse; the social
 plan
 That rank to rank cements, as man to
 man:
 Wealth flows around him, Fashion
 lordly reigns;
 Yet poverty is his and, and mental pains.
 (ll. 333–44)

This is a lament for the disappearance of the older inclusive harvest-home festivals described

earlier in the passage – occasions when
 'Distinction low'rs its crest, / [and] The master,
 servant, and the merry guest, / Are equal all'
 (ll. 323–5). The speaker concludes his lament
 with the plea:

Let labour have its due! my cot shall be
 From chilling want and guilty murmurs
 free:
 Let labour have its due; then peace is
 mine,
 And never, never shall my heart repine.
 (ll. 397–400)

The *British Critic* expressed concern at the tone of the passage and observed that 'the author [had] received some impressions, probably at the debating society, of a questionable kind'.³⁵ This is a reference to Bloomfield's brother's account, in Lofft's preface to *The Farmer's Boy*, of the poet's visits to 'a *Debating Society* at *Coachmaker's-hall*, [which he apparently frequented occasionally] but not often'.³⁶ In light of such fears about Bloomfield's politics, it is strange that the poet's appendix did not draw the ire of conservative reviews. The *British Critic's* reviewer may not have read the appendix, or might have assumed that, like the rest of the paratextual material in *The Farmer's Boy*, it was introduced into the volume by Capel Lofft. Remarks made by Bloomfield some years later indicate that his intention in including the Forster extract was just to encourage farmers to pay their workers a little more. In the annotated fair-copy manuscript of poem that he produced in 1807 he notes: 'I was pleading for kindness between the ranks of society, and it seem'd to suit my purpose. And if I could believe that what I have said of letting "Labour have its due" would in only one instance persuade a Farmer to give his men more wages, instead of giving, or suffering him to buy cheap corn in the time of trouble, I should feel a pleasure of the most lasting sort, having no doubt but that an extra half crown carried is worth, morally, and substantially, a

five shilling Gift, to those who in the House of their fathers work for bread'.³⁷

For Bloomfield's 'mourner' the traditional inclusive harvest-home has begun to disappear because so many farmers have become preoccupied with 'refinement' and 'fashion'. During the eighteenth century many commentators expressed the view that superfluous consumption of luxury goods (particularly by the middling classes) caused moral and social problems. Maxine Berg argues that 'over the course of the eighteenth century the luxury debates moved far beyond their traditional concerns with the corruption of the wealthy elites'.³⁸ In Bloomfield's poem, the critique of luxury is transformed into a leveller's manifesto when it is read with reference to the Forster extract. Forster argues that the 'miseries' and 'absolute want' of the lower classes in 'some civiliz'd states' result from the 'the unbounded voluptuousness of their superiors'. This is not a reference to the kind of refinement that Bloomfield's mourner is apparently bemoaning – the 'decanter' and 'canteens of cutlery' that William Cobbett would later find in the houses of farmers keen to set themselves apart from their labourers.³⁹ Forster clearly has the more extravagant luxury of the better-off gentry and the aristocracy in mind. He goes on to remark that the 'highest classes of people' in Otaheite 'possess some dainty articles, such as pork, fish, fowl, and cloth, almost exclusively; but the desire of indulging the appetite in a few trifling luxuries [as the Otaheite elite do] can at most render individuals, and not whole Nations [as in 'some civiliz'd states'], unhappy'.

The over-consumption of luxury goods is condemned elsewhere in *The Farmer's Boy* too. When 'the murd'ring Butcher, with his cart, / Demands the firstlings of his [the shepherd's] flock to die, / And makes a sport of life and liberty' (ll. 346–7) at the end of 'Spring' it is the metropolis that is implicitly responsible for the slaughter. The scene makes a profound

impression upon the watching shepherd as care 'loads his brow, and pity wrings his heart' (l. 345). Although agricultural labourers would not necessarily have been callous towards stock and working animals, nor would they have displayed this kind of sentimentality. But as a London artisan, Bloomfield would have encountered a different more politicised manner of thinking about animals, either at the debating societies that he attended or in print. In John Oswald's *The Cry of Nature* (1791) the vegetable diet is associated with social progress, and with the endeavour to establish a more egalitarian order marked by a universal benevolence which also encompassed the world of 'brutes'.⁴⁰ This is the diet of the majority of the population of Otaheite, which, according to the Forster extract, is a model of egalitarianism. But it is also the diet of the majority of the labouring poor. By the turn of the eighteenth century the poor could hardly afford meat, and when they were able to buy it they might have eaten pork or bacon, but almost certainly never lamb.⁴¹ Lamb, even mutton, would have been the preserve of the better off, and was in most cases a luxury item for all but the rich. Because of Suffolk's proximity to London, a significant proportion of the lamb produced in the county would have found its way into the metropolis, where there was an insatiable demand for meat.⁴² Just as the 'London market' for butter is responsible for a decline in the quality of Suffolk cheese (ll. 231–68). So the luxury sated appetites of wealthy Londoners are ultimately responsible for both the 'murder' of the young lambs, and the increasing polarisation of society.

The over-consumption of luxury goods is only part of the problem though. The growing gap, in terms of wealth, between the labouring poor and all other social groups within society makes the situation worse. Bloomfield lays the blame for the change in social relations in the countryside firmly at the door of this increased wealth. The speaker condemns 'The widening

distance which I daily see' (ll. 349), and rages:

Has Wealth done this? . . . then
Wealth's a foe to me;
Foe to our rights; that leaves the
pow'rful few
The paths of emulation to pursue.
(ll. 350–4)

It is the increased wealth of farmers, which will be partly the result of engrossment (the enclosure of smaller farms and small-holdings), that drives their more refined taste, and enables them to pursue their interest in fashion. The mourner's argument seems to be that wealth begins to corrode social relations if the gap between rich and poor becomes so great that the latter can no longer emulate the lifestyle of more privileged members of society. The new breed of wealthy farmers can emulate the gentry, but the labouring poor are left behind 'For emulation stoops to [. . . them] no more: / The hope of humble industry is o'er' (ll. 353–4). According to Forster, and by way of contrast, the 'evident distinction of ranks, which subsists at *Otaheite*, does not materially affect the felicity of the Nation' because the 'simplicity of their whole life contributes to soften the appearance of distinctions, and to reduce them to a level'. In fact, on '*Otaheite* there is not, in general, that disparity between the highest and the meanest man, that subsists in England between a reputable tradesman and a labourer.' In essence all have more or less the same simple and modest lifestyle on Otaheite, and the corrosive wealth gap that is gradually destroying community life on farms and in villages in the English countryside does not exist.

Because social relations are not corrupted by distinctions in wealth and in levels of refinement and luxury, there is free and easy intercourse between everyone on the island of Otaheite. In the words of Forster, the 'lowest man in the Nation speaks as freely with his King as with his equal, and has the pleasure of

seeing him as often as he likes'. Nor do empty posturing and display play any part in Otaheite society; the King does not require the Otaheite equivalent of 'decanters' or 'canteens of cutlery' to maintain his position and set him apart from his subjects. He is 'not yet [like Bloomfield's farmer] deprav'd by false notions of empty state, and even, 'at times, amuses himself with the occupations of his subjects'. But the same cannot be said for the fashionable farmer who has spurned the company of his labourers. The use of different receptacles for the harvest-home celebratory toast, on this the most important day in the rural calendar, symbolises a more general breakdown in social relations:

The self same [ceremonial] Horn is still
at our command
But serves none other than the Plebeian
hand / [...] /
Where unaffected freedom charm'd the
soul
The separate table, the costly bowl
Cool as the blast that checks the budding
Spring
A mockery of gladness round them fling.
(ll. 373–80)

Forster's critique of 'some civiliz'd states' also reflects upon this passage in that both the farmer and labourer are rendered 'unhappy' by the breakdown in social relations. The farmer derives no pleasure from his selected company, between whom there is certainly no free and easy social intercourse:

His guests selected, rank's punctilios
known,
What foul trouble waits upon a casual
frown!
Restraint's foul manacles his pleasures
maim,
Selected guests selected phrases claim,
Nor reigns that joy when hand in hand
they join

That good old Master felt in shaking mine!
(ll. 387–92)

With 'the substance gone', the labourer is left to partake in the 'aspect only' of the older inclusive harvest-home (l. 372).

The Forster extract clearly reflects back upon the account of the harvest-home at the end of 'Summer'. But it also represents a commentary upon other passages in *The Farmer's Boy*, in particular the winter evening scene at the beginning of the last book of the poem. The master and his labourers are represented sitting around the fire on a winter's evening. This is clearly an image derived from a world in which farm service still existed. There has been some debate over how widespread it was, and over when and for what reasons it began to decline. But in a recent and detailed study K. D. M. Snell finds that farm service did decline during the late eighteenth century and that this did have an impact upon social relations.⁴³ Before the trend towards an increased use of day-labourers began during the late eighteenth century, farm workers would generally be hired on an annual basis, often at hiring fairs, and would generally live on the farm and share the farmer's table and (as in Bloomfield's poem) leisure time. Whether or not Bloomfield is again imagining an older more traditional kind of farm, as in the harvest-home passage, is not clear, but he is concerned to represent the benefits of the service (or living-in) system. The fact that, on Bloomfield's farm, master and servant share both their labour and their leisure reinforces the bond between them:

Who lives the daily partner of our hours
Through every change of heat, and frost and
show'ers;
Partakes our cheerful meals, or burns with
thirst
In mutual labour, and in mutual trust,
The kindly intercourse will ever prove
A bond of amity and social love. (ll. 3–8)

But this 'bond of amity and social love' also has more functional benefits in terms of farming practice and animal husbandry. Giles (the farmer's boy of the title) is one of those sitting by the fire, but he is not there just to keep warm because he also learns from the talk of his more experienced comrades. He shares the converse 'though in duty's school / For now attentively tis his to hear / Interrogations from the Master's chair' (ll. 86–8). In an environment that fosters community of interest in the proper management of the farm, the master is able to ensure that the various duties of his servants have been completed satisfactorily. This 'bond of amity and social love' fostered by the easy social interaction between master and labourer in turn promotes a higher degree of care for the beasts that share life on the farm:

To more than man this generous warmth
extends
And oft the team and shive'ring herd
befriends
Tender solicitude the bosom fills
And pity executes what reason wills:
Youth learns compassion's tale from every
tongue
And flies to aid the helpless and the young.
(ll. 9–14)

The mutually beneficial and progressive network represented in 'Winter' can only exist in the kind of egalitarian social world of which farm service was an important part. The fact that Bloomfield does not explicitly locate his extended vignette in the past also implies that there is still something of the old rural social order to preserve.

Bloomfield included the Otaheite passage to reinforce his defence of a disappearing rural social order. So in suggesting that his only intention is to 'persuade a Farmer to give his men more wages', as he does in the note to the 1807 MS copy of the poem, he is being disingenuous. But the Otaheite passage and the

1807 MS note, when read together, actually introduce a further layer of complexity into Bloomfield's representation of rural England. Far from clarifying the situation, the fact that the poet makes a connection between *The Farmer's Boy* and Otaheite draws his poem into a multifarious and London-oriented political milieu. From the time of their first encounter with the south Pacific, Europeans viewed it and its inhabitants in a variety of ways.⁴⁴ Some accounts of Cook's voyages were received with horror by conservative commentators, fearful that idealistic visions of the South Sea islands might foster attempts to overturn both gender relations and the political order in Britain.⁴⁵ Hawkesworth's description of Otaheitian sexual mores, in particularly the rites of the Arioi, had caused a sensation, especially his suggestion that 'different [sexual] customs are the result of different circumstances, and . . . cannot be attributed to moral deficiencies' (Hawkesworth, ii. 128). But the concern went beyond just sexual moral questions. The apparent ease with which Otaheitians of all social classes satisfied their material needs was regarded as dangerously seductive for the labouring poor.⁴⁶ During the later 1790s, runaways on south-sea voyages were severely condemned in ways that they had not been before. The author of *A Missionary Voyage to the Southern Pacific in the years 1796, 1797, [and] 1798* remarked of a runaway: 'The indolent life he had led at Otaheite, the unobstructed ease with which all of his sensual appetites had been gratified there, with his aversion to labour, and the prospect of its necessity, which a return to Europe held up to his view, strongly urged him to prefer a lazy savage life upon these unpromising islands to his native Sweden, which he knows to have advantages only for the industrious.'⁴⁷ In this context it is clear that Bloomfield was entering into a pre-existing and highly charged political debate. But he goes further than the many literary responses to Otaheite in general, and Omai in particular, that, in the words of Tim

Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson, disturbed 'cosy assumptions about Britons' superiority to "savages" and forced a scrutiny of mores [or morals] at home and in the Pacific' (Fulford, Lee and Kitson, 59).

Bloomfield's mourner in the 'Harvest-home' passage at the end of 'Summer' is effectively lamenting the decline of the paternalist system in rural communities. But the 1807 MS note suggests that, like early trade unionists, the poet believed wages in the hand might be of greater value than some of the rewards workers received under this system. The account of Otaheite in the Forster extract even advocates a more level society without the distinctions in wealth and social status that were an integral part of the paternalist system. For a figure so often seen as firmly rooted in the past this is significant. Bloomfield does not consider the sort of action that might be necessary achieve the transformation that he implicitly advocates. But his critique of British social relations is surprisingly progressive, and does indicate that he was aware of the advantages of an alternative, if traditionally rooted, social order. It does not necessarily represent an abandonment of the poet's commitment to customary practices. It links him to the intellectual milieu that critics like Ann Janowitz find in late eighteenth-century London, where 'the opposition between historicist and rationalist logics was not secure on street level, where rationalists borrowed from and contributed to the languages of both custom and millenarianism, and, significantly, [where] the meaning of custom itself was far more dialectical and internally various than the elite version purveyed by Burke'.⁴⁸ *The Farmer's Boy*, when read in the context of the Otaheite passage and the 1807 MS note, indicates that Bloomfield believed both the maintenance of traditional customary practices (at a local level) and political change were required to improve the lives of the labouring poor.

The closing passages of 'Summer' are clearly full of oppositions and contradictions, and perhaps more than any other part of *The Farmer's Boy* reveal that critics like Jonathan Lawson and Roger Sales are wrong to endorse Lofft's presentation of Bloomfield as a simple rural poet.⁴⁹ But the composite nature of Bloomfield's response to rural England becomes particularly evident if his appendix is considered alongside the poem. In fact the appendix also problematises William J. Christmas's more recent argument that Bloomfield's only answer to the 'destruction' caused by bourgeois 'refinement' is the old organic order that 'linked landowner to tenant farmer to labourer'.⁵⁰ It also cuts against the negative effects of the link that is implicitly made between Bloomfield, as a labouring-class poet, and the fascinating, but intellectually and socially inferior Otaheiteans, exemplified by Omai. As will be apparent from the references to various accounts of Cook's voyages in this essay, Bloomfield could have chosen a passage that represents Otaheite in a very different way. But he chose a passage that critiques English social relations and challenges the idea that labouring-class poets should not imagine a world in which the labouring poor occupy a more elevated position in society. Even if most of his readers did not take the hint (contained in the Otaheite passage), this makes Bloomfield a politically radical poet, if not a radical per se, who did have a desire to transform the world in which he lived, and a poet who was too clever, rather than not clever enough, for his readers. It also makes him a poet who is not prepared to rest content with the patronising and often belittling accounts of so-called 'untaught genius' in patron's prefaces and reviews of the work of labouring-class writers.

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NOTES _____

1. Letter from Capel Lofft to George Bloomfield, 1 March 1800 in *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*, ed. Tim Fulford and Lynda Pratt (College Park, MD, 2009). Web. 12 November 2009.
2. Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2001), 21–98.
3. In the preface to the seventh edition, published in 1803, Bloomfield's editor (or patron), Capel Lofft remarked that 'when this Edition shall be published, 26,100 copies will have been printed in less than two years and three quarters', Robert Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy: A Rural Poem*, 7th edition (London, 1803), xxx.
4. Robert Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy: A Rural Poem* (London, 1800), 1–2. Except where noted, all future references will be to this edition and will appear within parenthesis in the text.
5. Georg Forster was a German naturalist and ethnologist who accompanied his father Johann Forster on James Cook's second voyage to the South Seas (1772–5). *A Voyage Around the World*, his account of the voyage, was published in 1777.
6. *The Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining Magazine for the fair Sex* and *The Town and Country Magazine, or Universal Repository* for May 1777 both printed this passage in their reviews of the two volumes. Or Bloomfield may have taken the passage from one of the numerous histories of Cook's voyages which included passages lifted from Forster - for example John Hamilton Moore's *A New and Complete Collection of Voyages and Travels* which was first published in 1785 or the anonymous *A New, Authentic Collection of Captain Cook's Voyages round the World* first published in 1786. In a way Bloomfield's mistake reflects the problems that Georg and Johann Reinhold Forster had in selling their book. Despite the fact that it received more favourable reviews than Cook's own journal, as the introduction to Thomas and Bergof's edition points out, it was 'abridged, pirated, printed in excerpt—in short, every thing but sold', Georg Forster, *A Voyage Around the World*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof, assisted by Jennifer Newell (2 vols, Honolulu, 2000), i. xxxvi.
7. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 160 (3 September 1711).
8. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*. In *a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (Dublin, 1759), 17.
9. William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius; and its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, Particularly in Poetry*, 2nd edn (London, 1767), 29.
10. John Barrell, 'Sportive Labour: The Farmworker in Eighteenth-Century Poetry and Painting' in *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, ed. Brian Short (Cambridge, 1992), 109.
11. Robert Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy: A Rural Poem*, 2nd edition (London, 1800), xxiv.
12. Stephen Turner, 'A History Lesson: Captain Cook Finds Himself in the State of Nature' in *Voyages and Beaches: Pacific Encounters, 1769–1840*, ed. Jonathan Lamb, Alex Calder and Bridget Orr (Honolulu, 1999), 90.
13. *A New Moral System of Geography, Containing an Account of the Different Nations Ancient and Modern*, 2nd edn. (London, 1790), 193–94.
14. Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson, *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2004), 56.
15. As Bridget Keegan notes of this passage, 'while one might . . . be flattered to be declared a genius, it would be the most backhanded of compliments if this also meant that one was simultaneously being identified as the mental equivalent of a potted plant'. See Bridget Keegan, 'Boys, Marvellous Boys: John Clare's 'Natural Genius' in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. John Goodridge and Simon Kovesi (Helpston, 2000), 67.
16. John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken . . . for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere* (3 vols, London, 1767), i. 186.
17. E. Edwards and G. Hamilton, *Voyage of the H.M.S. Pandora [1791]*, ed. Basil Thomson (London, 1915), 108–09.
18. Dana Lepovsky, 'Gardens of Eden? An Ethnohistoric Reconstruction of Maohi [Tahitian] Cultivation', *Ethnohistory*, 46, 1 (1999), 1–29, 4.
19. Letter from Robert Bloomfield to Isaac Bloomfield, 16 July 1807 in *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*. Web. 12 November 2009.
20. Letter from Robert Bloomfield to Capel Lofft, 26 October 1801 in *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*. Web. 12 November 2009.

21. Robert Bloomfield, *The Poems of Robert Bloomfield* (2 vols, London, 1809), i. xviii.
22. A Prince Lee Boo had been brought to England from the Palau Islands (now the Republic of Belau) by Captain Henry Wilson, whose East India Company ship *The Antelope* was wrecked off the islands in August 1783. Lee Boo was taken into Captain Wilson's family and educated at their expense, but died of smallpox in December 1784, only five months after arriving in England. He did not achieve the celebrity status that Omai would only a few months later.
23. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. by R. W. Chapman and Pat Rogers (Oxford, 1980), 723.
24. *The Early Diary of Frances Burney, 1768–1778*, ed. by Annie Raine Ellis (2 vols, London, 1907), i. 337.
25. Frances Burney, *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (2 vols, London, 1832), i. 270–1.
26. *Monthly Magazine*, 56 (September 1823), 181–2, 182, my italics. The editor of this magazine, Sir Richard Phillips, was one of the 'literary gentlemen' who rejected *The Farmer's Boy* when Bloomfield originally tried to get the poem published in 1798. But Bloomfield was not forgotten by his readers, and his poetry remained popular throughout the nineteenth century. According to the sales figures for one major London bookseller, he was the fifth most popular poet during the period 1835 to 1895. Only Burns, Byron, Milton and Pope eclipsed him in terms of sales. See B. C. Bloomfield, 'The Publication of *The Farmer's Boy* by Robert Bloomfield', *The Library*, 15 (1993), 75–94, 92.
27. *Omlah's Farewell; Inscribed to the Ladies of London* (London, 1776), iv.
28. James Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (3 vols, London, 1784), ii. 106.
29. William Cowper, *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (London and New York, 1994), 663–71.
30. Bloomfield, *The Poems of Robert Bloomfield*, i. xxxv. For an account of the poem that the visit to Whittlebury Forest inspired Bloomfield to write see Simon J. White, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community* (Aldershot, 2007), 63–7.
31. Bloomfield, *The Poems of Robert Bloomfield*, i. xxxiii
32. Letter from Robert Bloomfield to Thomas Clio Rickman, 29 May 1804 in *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*. Web. 12 November 2009.
33. Letter from Robert Bloomfield to T. J. Lloyd Baker, 31 May–1 June 1821 in *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*. Web. 12 November 2009.
34. Tim Fulford, 'Bloomfield in his Letters: The Social World of a London Shoemaker Turned Suffolk Poet' in the Robert Bloomfield special issue of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* [title not available], ed. John Goodridge (College Park, MD, forthcoming).
35. *British Critic*, 15 (June 1800), 601–8, 602.
36. Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy*, 2nd edition, ix.
37. Robert Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy* (Houghton Library, MS Eng. 776.1, fol. 27).
38. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2007), 30.
39. William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed. George Woodcock (London, 1967), 226 and 227.
40. Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge, 1994), 25.
41. John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London, 1966), 13.
42. J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet* (London, 1939), 227.
43. K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change in Agrarian England 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1985), 67–103. See also Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981), 49–93 and 120–34.
44. Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd edition (New Haven and London, 1985), 133–54.
45. Anne Maxwell, 'Fallen Queens and Phantom Diadems: Cook's Voyages and England's Social Order', *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 38 (1997), 247–58, 247.
46. For an account of the role of gender in images of the Otaheitian's apparent life of ease see Harriet Guest, *Empire, Barbarism and Civilization: Captain Cook, William Hodges, and the Return to the Pacific* (Cambridge, 2007), 28–67.
47. *A Missionary Voyage to the Southern Pacific Ocean ... in the years 1796, 1797, 1798. Compiled*

- from the journals of the officers and missionaries* (London, 1799), 301.
48. Ann Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1998), 63.
49. Jonathan Lawson, *Robert Bloomfield* (Boston, 1980), 57 and Roger Sales, *English Literature in History, 1780–1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London, 1983), 20.
50. William J. Christmas, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730–1830* (Newark and London, 2001), 275.