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Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806

Mary Waldron

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Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806 Mary Waldron Ann Yearsley was an English poet, playwright, and novelist who lived most of her life in a village near Bristol. Though she began her adult life as a milkwoman she later became the chief support of her family through her writing and proprietorship of a circulating library. This literary biography offers the most thoroughly researched and reasoned account to date of the complex political and social causes of Yearsley's gradual exclusion from the annals of literature.

Yearsley published her first volume of poetry in 1785 with the support of Hannah More and other members of the "Bluestocking" circle, who regarded her as something of a primitive savant. Soon thereafter, however, Yearsley broke with her patrons in a bitter dispute regarding the book's profits. Although condemned for ingratitude by More and her friends, Yearsley continued to publish with the support of more liberal members of the establishment.

Nevertheless, the more conservative counsels prevailed as events in France from 1789 demonstrated the dangers of popular political agitation. Although Yearsley consistently rejected such activity, her perceived status tended to label her at least potentially subversive.

Consequently, most commentary on her work during her later writing life and the century after her death portrayed her primarily as the ungrateful protégée of the more acceptable More, and mistakenly associated her with such avowed radicals as Mary Wollstonecraft.

Although present-day Marxist and feminist theorists deserve much credit for revitalizing interest in Yearsley, says Mary Waldron, the writer has often been just as misrepresented or misunderstood by her modern champions, being celebrated for the very qualities or tendencies erroneously attributed to her by earlier readers and critics.

With the publication of this broad literary-historical study, a more complete picture of Yearsley, as an individual and on her own terms, emerges.

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