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Earthling: the labourer and the soil

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Abstract
Geography is a discipline rooted in the idea of ‘earth writing’, yet until recently human geographers had left the study of the very matter of the earth – the soil beneath our feet – to natural scientists. If human geographers – amongst other humanities scholars – have begun to address human-soil relationships there is a need to attend to meanings invested in and generated by being with the soil. This paper attempts to address this by analysing the relationship with the soil by those who made their living by tilling and tending it, rural agricultural workers, those who laboured on (and in) the soil. Specifically, it focuses on the ‘long 19th century’, the period at the start of which when labourers remained the largest occupational sector but when agricultural ‘improvement’, industrialisation and rapid urbanisation were challenging human-soil entanglements. Drawing upon novels, poetry and biographical writing, this paper plots three key ways in which the relationship between rural workers and the soil was figured: as the link to the past; as inheritance, the promise of the future; and through the affective nature of tilling. In so thinking about these multi-layered meanings, the paper shows not only the value of excavating past human-environmental entanglements but also the need to adopt a cultural geographical methodology and sensibility. In sum, it is shown that soil was a crucible not just of life but of meaning in life.

Keywords
Anthropocene, environment, imagination, labourer, rural, soil, 19th-century

There is a profound irony in that for a discipline rooted in the idea of ‘earth writing’, human geographers have until recently turned away from the matter beneath our feet which has been most profoundly made and remade by humans: the soil. As Anna Krzywoszynska and Greta Marchesi have put it ‘Soils are the most important thing that we rarely think about’. It was not always this way. As Jesús Rodrigo-Comino et al. note, geographical interest in soils originated not just in branches of what later became labelled as physical geography but also in agricultural geography and agronomy. Human geographers’ detachment from the soil mirrors a more general human trend, not just in the academy but in terms of our species’ visceral everyday engagements with the matter beneath our feet. If, as J. R. McNeill and Verena Winiwarter have it, ‘[f]or most of history, few things have mattered more to human communities than their relations with soil, because soil

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provided most of their food and nutrients’, by June 2019, only 26.75% of the world’s population was directly employed in agriculture, this a figure declining year-on-year. Thus soil might still matter – though there is a growing movement calling for a break in the relationship between the soil and our sustenance, the production of food shifting from farm to factory – but the direct link in many ways has been severed.

The combined influences of the intellectual challenge of the concept of the Anthropocene, the concurrent provocation of hybrid and non-human methodologies, and the rise of environmental history have encouraged a recent renewed interest in soil in human geography and beyond. From analyses of the domestic garden in which being with the soil is vital to a form of ‘ethical reciprocity’ to new forms of ‘multinatural, multispecies way[s] of life’, to analyses of the role that ‘attentiveness’ can (and cannot) play in caring for the soil, studies of soil are assuming a central place in a geography concerned with how we might live better with all things. A function of the focus on the future in this pioneering work, is necessarily that soil cultures past have tended to figure less prominently, Franklin Ginn’s inspiring paper on the 1940s English ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign a notable exception if not a study of the soil per se. This paper attends to this lacuna in focusing on the relationship with the soil by those who made their living by tilling and tending it, the rural worker (and by this I mean all those who had to directly on the land to get by, the agricultural labourers, the peasant farmers, the cottagers and squatters), and specifically during the ‘long 19th century’. Why might this specific focus matter? Whilst we know a great deal about how those in the Global South living on and with the land make sense of their environments, we know remarkably little about rural workers in the time and place of the first industrial revolution, that moment in time when the Anthropocene arguably became meaningful and our connection with the soil started to fundamentally change. At mid-century and arguably until the final years of the 19th century more people, more families, made a living from the soil than in any other way. This relationship has a specific word in the English language: earthling, an Anglo-Saxon term that translates as ‘one of the earth’ and was used to describe those that worked the soil. The term might have subsequently assumed a broader meaning, but here I wish to rescue the original meaning – and to assert the centrality of the study of being at one with the soil as a crucial component of a vital(ist) cultural geography.

If the study of rural workers has a long history, their customs, communities, poverty, protests, politics and work(lessness) all subjected to systematic study, their engagement, their entanglement with their environments and material worlds has been subject to remarkably little study. This, then, is part of a bigger intellectual project attempting to write the environmental lives of those who once worked the land. If the central purpose of the paper, then, is to understand how the relationship between rural workers and the soil was figured in this critical period, there is also a broader point in that comprehending the cultural life of the soil before the disconnect of industrial capitalism is important in helping inform new forms of reciprocity in the here-and-now. Or, to draw on the inspiring work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa on ‘entanglements of human–soil matter’, to transform human-soil affections. I see this not as a challenge, a corrective even, to studies of the labourer as rooted in the political economy tradition. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that it is impossible to conceive of a connection between rural workers and the soil in the period that is not in some way informed and transformed by the workings of an increasingly international capitalism. Rather, this study asks other questions of other archives, it opens alternative worlds and different ways of thinking of being-in-the-world.

As with all historical studies of rural workers, attempting to understand their lives and dispositions tends to be reliant on second-hand accounts, few are the labouring biographies that survive and fewer still that say much about the author’s sensuous, imaginative and intellectual engagements with their worlds. And given that the records with which ‘from below’ scholars have used
to write the lives of the rural poor tend to be archives of poverty and precariousness, to write a cultural geography of being with the soil necessarily rests largely upon the representations of others. Indeed, whilst the topic might sit at the interconnection between human geography, environmental history and the wider environmental humanities, reading the extant archive requires a cultural geography sensibility in making sense of the range of complex texts on which the project necessarily rests. This is not a problem but rather a useful provocation: by drawing upon sources that scholars of our environmental pasts less readily turn to we might become better attuned to reading environmental lives as something more than just visceral and embodied but also as imagined and as central to customs and beliefs. The structure of the paper thus mirrors the extant archive and reflects this opportunity. After considering the place of the soil in cultural geography (and the wider humanities) and how we might begin to engage in knowing that which is seemingly unknowable, what follows is structured around three critical themes in the lives of rural workers. The first section considers the soil as the link to the past; the second section analyses the soil as the labourers’ inheritance, the promise of the future; and the third considers the moment of being with the soil, the act tilling.

Writing soil

That the relationship between the labourer and the soil has remained obscure reflects a longstanding intellectual indifference that is only starting to change. If soil science (and the science of soils) is a vast field, more human-facing studies of soil – that is say any studies concerned with the relationship between humans and the soil – are fewer the ground. Beyond resource management studies, and these arguably an offshoot of soil science given their concern with maintaining fertility not human-soil relationships per se, humanities scholars and social scientists have tended until recently to think about humans and soils in terms of problems. Indeed, work in environmental history has reflected the resource management approach, focusing on how soils have been abused and managed in the past or upon the politics of their management.15 In Anthropology work has likewise engaged with lay soil knowledges and studies of soil management amongst indigenous peoples in the Global South, James Fraser calling for anthropologists to deploy such studies of local ‘soil knowledge’ in offering alternatives to the crisis created by industrial agriculture.16

There is, then, a growing realisation that, in the words of Winiwarter and Winfried Blum, souls and soils ought be conjoined in study. Indeed, in the work of Winiwarter, Blum, de la Bellacasa, McNeill, Salisbury, Anna Krzywoszynska, Marchesi and Benno Warkentin, amongst others, we see a concerted effort to write soil into the study of society. Warkentin’s now 15 year-old edited book Footprints in the Soil arguably offers the widest range of approaches, Nicole Boivin and Mary Ann Owic’s 2005 edited collection a richly suggestive analysis of rituals and symbolism in relation to soil, while McNeill and Winiwarter’s Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History the only sustained historical study, although both are dominated by scientific and resource management concerns.17 Work in the conceptually-rich and often creatively-focused environmental- and geo-humanities has also started to take soil seriously, a themed section of the journal Environmental Humanities devoted to ‘conceiving soils and humans in the Anthropocene’.18 The UK-based ‘Soil Culture’ programme bringing together 12 different artists, and involving organisations such as Kew Gardens and the Eden Project, to mark the 2015 United Nations International Year of Soils by exploring ‘the vital, ecological importance of soil’ also speaks to a deepening cultural engagement with soil.19

Such interventions speak not only to the broadening base of the renewal of a more-than-scientific interest in soil but also to the space for cultural geographers to help thicken and nuance our understandings, to think about attachments to the soil and understandings of and vested in the soil.
This is, in some ways, a project beginning to take root. Beyond the aforementioned work by Krzywoszynska and Ginn, we might also speak to metaphorical and allegorical geopoetic telling of soil in Tim Cresswell’s volume of poetry (Soil), whilst this journal published several studies in the early 2000s analysing cultures of soil degradation and the idea of soil as the vestige of particular political attachments. Beyond environmental history with its particular foci, cultural historians and historians of art too have started to embrace the soil as a critical nexus in understanding the making of worlds and worlds of meaning. Thus in Jeremy Burchardt’s history of the organic movement in mid-20th-century Britain there is an acknowledgement that the movement not only understood soil to be the ‘essential basis of life’ but also conceived of the soil in reverent terms, not just as the biochemical basis of being but as having a deeper cosmological importance.

This engagement with the soil in agrarian histories is a longstanding and enduring one. If, as Barbara Kerr has put it, the soil ‘held in bondage’ the whole rural community, ‘farmers. . . tithet-seeking parsons, rent-collecting landlords, wheelwrights, brewers and attorneys’, rural historians have tended to focus more on soil management rather than wider cultural meanings and attachments. From the early 18th century no handbook on husbandry was without comment and suggestion as to how to manage and improve the soil; the first volume of Thomas Hale’s four volume A Compleat Body of Husbandry (1756–8) little short of a love letter to the soil. If, as James Fisher has noted in his landmark book The Enclosure of Knowledge, agricultural handbooks ‘stood on the shoulders of peasants’ by appropriating lay knowledges of those who worked the soil, we know virtually nothing of rural workers and their relationship with the soil. The importance of the relationship is understood though: Vron Ware devotes a chapter of Return of the Native: Learning from the Land to what she labels the process of ‘robbing the soil’ including a retelling of the use of ground human bones as fertiliser in early 19th century England.

Yet the meanings invested in the relationship remain untold. If the gap in our knowledge is in large part a function of the tendency of research on rural workers tending to focus on political economy approaches, it is important to remember that studies of our rural pasts provide some of the foundational texts of the post-Sauerian cultural geography. Indeed, John Barrell’s analysis of the geographies of Hardy’s Wessex arguably set the course for a critical literary geography sensitive to the interplay between characters, narrator and readers in comprehending the telling of space and place. As with Barrell’s paper, what follows here also draws on Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Return of the Native, amongst a range of other literary writings, surveys and social investigations, biographies and diaries. All of these are sophisticated representations of the world, yet, as Barrell reminds us, Hardy’s point in Tess and Return of the Native is to stress that the dwelt knowledge of place for his working protagonists was so intense that it was impossible to represent or to truly comprehend. Whatever the truths therein, to Hardy this was a narrative device rooting knowledge of place by smell, by sound and ‘by the feel of the earth underfoot’. This device would go on to define the ‘organic community’ approach of a set of novels that Glen Cavaliero has grouped under the tag of the ‘The cult of the primitive’. This distinctive genre became plagued with genre issues, the repetition of earthy tropes and themes led to leading to the approach being critiqued as the ‘loam and lovechild’ approach and satirised in Stella Gibbons’ Cold Comfort Farm. Reading such texts to understand the relationship between workers and the soil then cannot rest on the idea that they are merely repositories of insightful information, archives of another sort that can be, after Ann Laura Stoler, treated as another extractive exercise. Rather, as Marc Brosseau has put it, we need to acknowledge such literary texts are based on ‘an intricate and complex signifying practice. . . which requires great scrutiny’. Thus whilst we can gain insights into the mentalities and lives of rural workers – as E.P. Thompson acknowledged, Hardy was ‘superbly perceptive of folk customs’ – we also need to appreciate that Hardy and others were not attempting to write a cultural geography of the soil. We need, therefore, to appreciate and
attend to the multiple layerings of being in (and of) place: the dwelt; the venerated; the mythic; the appropriated; the obliterated.

**Chthonic belongings: soil as the link to the past**

The soil as the bedrock of rural labouring life, as the material vestige of the past, and as the anchor of belonging is a recurrent trope in much rural realist writing. For George Eliot, the soil was the medium from which belonging grew which then bled into a wider metaphor for the supposed groundedness of nationhood, this a central theme in *Daniel Deronda*, her last novel published in 1876. Yet beyond the idea that nations and nationality were rooted in the soil, Eliot’s early novels are written through with the idea that for rural workers the soil defined their belonging. Eliot’s first published novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), is set in the fictional Midlands county of Loamshire – an obvious and explicit reference to the primacy of the soil in an agrarian county – wherein all were ‘indebted to the hard hands of such men, – hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth’s fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages”. As Jim Scown has suggested, Loamshire ‘instantiates vitality in the interrelations of landscape and society, individual and environment’, these the subjects in which Eliot’s rural realism is grounded. To mingle with the soil, to be of Loamshire, was not just to work it but to return to it in an endless cycle of life and sustaining life beyond.

For Thomas Hardy, the labourers’ sense of connection and belonging to and with the soil was not just about the repeated practices of men (and women and children) tending to the soil over generations, but also something understood as ancient and animistic. Indeed, the rooting of the labourer went further, being grounded in the relic bodies of ancestors buried in the chalk of Wessex. To understand the Dorset labourer was to read the past in the matter of the landscape, a theme that Hardy returns to not just in several of his novels but also in his journalistic essay on the Dorsetshire labourer published in Longman’s Magazine. It was, so the narrator suggests, to see them as being vestiges of the past, their love of blood, ritual and superstition evidence of their being living relics. To understand them was to practise an ‘archaic anthropology’. The soil was the history of the labourer: it was a reliquary of their past containing the bones and belongings of their ancestors; and it bore the evidence of having been worked by the same ancestors. This surface level narrating of soils also serves a deeper authorial purpose. It speaks to Hardy’s own positioning as someone who well knew the labourer’s attitudes, dispositions and beliefs yet also accepted that without living with and alongside the labourer, on the surface, the community appeared to ‘a uniform collection of concrete Hodges’ whose homes and faces were coloured ‘any of the numerous varieties of mud colour’ that gave the impression of ‘filth and Giant Despair’.

In the case of Egdon Heath, the setting of Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, working was not tilling but instead the slow grooving of the sandy soils by the walking of animals and their humans; the cropping of the thin foliage by the ponies and cattle; exercising the custom of turbary; and the digging of the red ochre. As Hardy put it in describing the gathering of the folk of the Heath at Rainbarrow to watch the 5 November bonfire:

> It showed the barrow to be the segment of a globe, as perfect as on the day when it was thrown up, even the little ditch remaining from which the earth was dug. Not a plough had ever disturbed a grain of that stubborn soil. In the heath’s barrenness to the farmer lay its fertility to the historian. There had been no obliteration, because there had been no tending.

By virtue of this connection and the persistence of being on and working the same soil, the English labourer was, so the point goes, rooted; the true natives of the place. Thus Tess, as Hardy’s
narrator relates, was displaced, both geographically and bodily. In Trantridge she was the ‘sapling which had rooted down to a poisonous stratum on the spot of its sowing’, but having fled to Talbothays she found somewhere to which she was ‘physically and mentally suited. . . transplanted to a deeper soil’. Here, soil is both the narrator’s metaphor for that necessary to nourish the soul and that which literally grounds Tess and the residents of Egdon Heath, the conjoining of soils and souls assuming different depths and meanings. Compare ‘Norman’ Tess’s qualified nativeness, her rejection by, and of, the Trantridge soil, to that of Diggory Venn, the reddleman protagonist of *The Return of the Native*. If his trade took him around the country selling ‘reddle’, the red ochre farmers used to mark their sheep, the ochre was from the very Egdon Heath that was Venn’s home and that of his ancestors. Venn’s life and livelihood were then literally of the heathland soil, his body discoloured red from head to toe. Grounded in a particularly rural animism and informed by an ancient mysticism rooted in the soil-bound relics of the past, Venn is positioned as a vestige of the past and as a magical figure; someone whose luck and fortune are Mephistophelean, a folk devil who is not just bound to the soil of the heath but, so the allusion goes, someone who has come up from the very underground. In Venn’s giving up his trade as a reddleman to become a dairy farmer he is literally throwing off his and the past of the place, the symbolism deepened by his washing off of his devilish red patina. The voice of Hardy’s narrator here is deliberately ambiguous, Victorian modernity told at once as a violence against the past and yet a discarding of the shackles that a belief in an animistic agency had bound people to place, to the soil.

Hardy’s layered, complex reading of the Dorsetshire labourer’s connection to the soil has direct parallels in George Ewart Evans’ later oral histories of East Anglian rural workers. To Evans most rural belief systems ‘came from the old chthonic cult whose main concern was the fertility of both animal and the soil. . .for unless the soil gave abundant crops and the animals multiplied the primitive was lost’. Attitudes to the soil, Evans found, were akin ‘almost to veneration’, ‘the soil was something to be nursed and treated with the utmost consideration’. Such a profound connection was, Evans went on, ‘only one remove from animism and addressing the earth as Mother’, the land and the soil being ‘a living partner’ for those who worked on it. George Sturt earlier saw the same association. Knowing the soil was to venerate it, and to live and work with it was to engage the present with the past:

> Out of all these circumstances—the pride of skill in handicrafts, the detailed understanding of the soil and its materials, the general effect of the well-known landscape, and the faint sense of something venerable in its associations—out of all this there proceeded an influence which acted upon the village people as an unperceived guide to their conduct, so that they observed the seasons proper for their varied pursuits almost as if they were going through some ritual.

From the soil sprang civilisation itself, and the ‘quality’ of the soil determined the properties of the civilisation of the community, whose livelihoods depended on and whose life-worlds sprang from it.

**Inheritance: soil as the promise of the future**

Before the enclosure of commons and wastes, both those with common rights and those who informally (if technically illegally) used the things and spaces of common were sustained to varying degrees by the soil of commonable lands. As Jeanette Neeson has it, if ‘the soil itself, the land, was not the commoner’s. . . the use of it was’. The produce of the earth extended from digging the soil, sands and stones variably for illicit sale, building, rendering, repairing and cleaning (sand being used to scour cottage floors); using the flora of the common to pasture livestock, eating the fruits, fungi and nuts of the common; and using the gorse, bracken, wood and timber for heating,
cooking and building. If the exercise of common rights was truly the communal harvesting of the soil, the plebeian investment in the soil was not a material one per se — beyond the manuring of commons by grazing stock (and even this manure was often collected to help fertilise whatever garden the commoner might have) but rather a psychological and cultural one. Indeed, in Hardy’s sense the relationship outwardly might appear to have been one of exploitation, but the bond, the psychic investment of the commoner in the lifespace of the common, was richly meaningful and respectful. It was the sense, as Neeson discusses, of not just the shared use of the common but also a sense of ownership of the life of the common, of what the common meant and was, that mattered. Enclosure was, then, an act of disinheritance of an always assumed future, a profound dislocation in the relationship between rural worker and the soil.

For Walter Rose, a carpenter from the village of Haddenham (Buckinghamshire) the soil was the labourer’s inheritance, and enclosure – which came to Haddenham in 1830 – was an act of disinheritance, not just of the land but of the soil. The small plots once owned and tended by so many families were now lost, the costs of enclosure met by the sale of the lands granted to them by the Commissioners, so that now the ‘the daily work of these men was cultivating the land of others’. In this way, enclosure, as Rose saw it, had weakened the bond between labourers and the land, the labourer now ‘less wedded to the soil’, the expression both figurative and literal. Allotments had come too late to change this, and the absolute dislocation of the First World War finally dissolved the bond altogether.

There is an obvious point here. Post-enclosure the rural poor were usually engaged in tilling the soil for others, for commercially orientated farmers. This was the fundamental shift: ‘It was of the essence of the old system that those living under it subsisted in the main upon what their own industry could produce out of the soil and materials of their own countryside’. Upon enclosure, the link between the soil and the labourer was very different. In this not only was the shift in ‘ownership’ of the soil important but also now that someone else was making decisions about how the land – and thus ultimately the soil – was managed, decisions made ultimately on a less intimate knowledge of the quality and capacity of the soil. As Sturt noted of the dispossessed labourer: ‘[He was] jealous of the encroachment of gravelled walk or evergreen hedge upon the useful soil; an expert in digging and dunging—he is very well aware that the praises of the villa-people employing him are ignorant praises. His best skill is, after all, overlooked’. Opposition to enclosure, and its afterlives, was never just concerned with livelihood and access, nor even the ability to be at one with the soil on one’s own terms, but also about the disavowal of a set of vernacular knowledges and skills rooted in and of the soil.

The intensity of feeling, of connection, between rural workers and the soil was probably more deeply affective before enclosure. Certainly, the so-called peasant poet John Clare thought so. For Sturt’s heathland community of the Surrey-Hampshire borders, ‘the barren soil challenged the people to a severer struggle for bare subsistence, the tradition could not put forth its fairer, its gentler, features’. The labouring people, or rather ‘the genuine peasant order’, had to ‘rough it . . . to put up with ugliness’ by dint of the poverty of the soil. Yet theirs was enriched in other ways: ‘by their own skill and knowledge they forced the main part of their living out of the soil and materials of their own neighbourhood’. This ‘forced’ practical knowledge also engendered a deep satisfaction and shaped a deeply philosophical outlook on their place in the world; the labourer’s cosmos was rooted in the soil and thus their locality.

Here Sturt’s point provides a vital corrective. To write of the soil is a totalising fallacy. There were – there are – a huge variety of soil types, all with different qualities for different purposes. Edward Harrison in his 1803 paper in the Annals of Agriculture on ‘the nature of the soil’, notwithstanding his tendency to classify soils as good or bad, noted that loamy lands were well suited to
many crops but when left for grazing often led to particularly bad foot rot in animals as water stagnated on the surface.\textsuperscript{59} Soil, so the point goes, determined settlement. Without wishing to stray fully into the environmental determinism of Harrison, a critical point holds: as the work of Tom Williamson shows, the underlying geology and subsequent works of ‘improvement’ had a profound impact upon the sociality of the place and the relationship of the people and the soil.\textsuperscript{60} Of course, the developing application of chemistry to the management of soils managed to, in part if not in full, sever the link between soil type and agricultural production, the bond between soil and society, as Marchesi has shown, profoundly altered. In particular, from mid-century Justus von Liebig’s revolutionary soils research helped to encourage the use of organic nitrogen fertiliser, thus stimulating global demand and leading to a nutrient transfer from the south to the north.\textsuperscript{61} This further fuelled another shift which saw that the production for urban markets – the essential driver for the intensification of agrarian capitalism – meant that the soil was being depleted, something Marx observed of English agriculture and labelled the ‘metabolic rift’, the disconnect between the place of extraction and consumption/use. It was not only Marx that observed this – but also rural workers themselves. As Walter Rose saw it, the coming of the railway impoverished the land. When corn, hay and straw was sent away by train ‘the goodness of the soil was being taken away, and nothing put in its place’\textsuperscript{62}

**Tilling: the present of soil**

There is also a critical point here about shifting technologies, and in particular the change from the spade to the plough. The cottage economy, whether in pre- or post-enclosure systems, was defined by spade husbandry, the tilling of the garden and for many peasants their arable plots too. To William Cobbett, the mantra of the cottager ought to be that ‘they should depend more on the spade and the hoe than the manure heap’, that is, that tilling came before all else.\textsuperscript{63} If it is easy anachronistically to romanticise the act of spade digging – it is after all irremissibly hard work – we do well to remember that the spade was held in particular esteem by many rural workers. One respondent to George Ewart Evans related that ‘Everything was dug with a spade. They reckoned the spade was a wonderful implement in those days, everything by hand’.\textsuperscript{64} Indeed, spades were considered to be one of the few essential items that labourers would invest in, they were prized possessions whose ownership inferred a degree of self-determination and self-dependence, not just amongst labourers but also amongst navvies.\textsuperscript{65} As Sturt noted, ‘spades and reap-hooks of well-proved quality were treasured as friends’\textsuperscript{66} The spade turned the one resource the labourer had in abundance – the seemingly endless capacity to work – into food and money, the slicing of the soil was thus richly powerful and symbolic. It could also bring a sensuous engagement with the soil, a pride in the practice of the skill, an enchantment with the matter of the world:

\[T\]hough work upon the ground with a spade or hoe has such a soothing influence upon the amateur, there is a difference between doing it for pleasure during a spare hour and doing it as a duty after a twelve hours’ day. . . Nevertheless it is plain to be seen that. . . these quiet and patient men experience no less a compensating delight in the friendly feeling of the tool responding to their skill, and in the fine freshness of the soil as they work it. . .\textsuperscript{67}

The extent to which this held true in the various make-work ‘spade husbandry’ schemes that emerged in the late 1810s which set labourers to ‘trenching’ fields at pitiful wages, and later given vocal by the Labourer’s Friend Society in the 1830s, is perhaps a moot point, for even a tool of liberation and delight can become an agent of oppression.\textsuperscript{68}
Huge personal pride and satisfaction was also invested in the skill of ploughing. If ploughing was one stage further removed in that it was normally carried out as wage labour, it was still a turning over of the soil, and fed a closeness between the labourer and the soil. No wonder that ploughing was associated with so many rituals and customs, not least Plough Monday which marked the start of the agricultural year. To John Clare those who put down Plough Monday rituals in his native village of Helpston were ‘vulgar tyrants of the soil’.70

In some senses the distinction between soil, plough and ploughman is unhelpful though. To plough was to have one foot on the plough and one in the furrow, whilst to dig was to have one foot on the spade and one on the solid earth. When questioned as to where he derived his skill as a poet, John Clare – the ‘little ploughman’ as Ronald Blythe called him – claimed he ‘kicked it out of the clods’.71 Meaning and inspiration came from the soil, however one tended and tilled it. John Clare notwithstanding his physical slightness knew first-hand how to dig, how to plough from a young age. Clare’s benefactors believed that this connection with the soil was both his inspiration and, being the ‘peasant poet’, all that he knew. The only thing that would offer succour to Clare was to set him to labour on the land.72 As one-time agricultural ‘day lad’ Fred Kitchen put it: ‘I know farm lads are not credited with much wisdom, but perhaps the general opinion is wrong, for who knows what a lad is turning over in his mind as he walks along his furrow?’73

The furrow channelled the mind, the soil provided the haptic link to the whole world; ploughing a revealing, a turning over, not just of the dark earth but revelatory to the whole creation, a charging of the imagination. To Kitchen this took form in remembered poems – ‘life has been made rich because when ploughing up a nest of field-mice I could recite Robert Burn’s Ode to a Field-mouse’74 – and for Clare such sensuous engagements inspired his poetry (and prose). If other labourers, indeed the majority of other labourers, did not express this connection through verse, this is in no way to deprecate the understanding that for many labourers the act of ploughing (and digging) was not just a visceral engagement with the soil but also to the wider being. As Joseph Ashby recalled of ploughing as a young lad with old carter Jasper on farmer Ainge’s farm at Tysoe: ‘Elderly man and boy would look out together over the great green vale, telling each other that it was always changing. Always the light was throwing up some field, or a distant little spinney never seen from here before’.75

The power, the shock, of Clare’s writing, and other ‘peasant poets’ and rural realist writers, was in showing to the wider populace that rural workers were not just brute creations incapable of anything other than mechanical reflex but that such thoughts illuminated their everyday. Engaged in the field from dawn till eventide, with so much time to think and reflect and with the soil for company – ‘with his hands to the plough, is significant in his solitude, master of earth’ as Adrian Bell had it – it is little wonder that the labourer would turn to making sense of what was at hand and their place in it.76

**Conclusions**

This paper charts a way forward in how we can engage in an imaginative archaeology of past labouring-environmental entanglements – and how we might think anew about the cultural importance of soil. This matters beyond the spatial contexts of this paper too, for rural workers comprised the largest occupational group not just in England and Wales but in all places before mass urbanisation. This is, or at least should be, of critical concern to geographers, such cultural and historical geographies being hitherto woefully under-explored. Indeed, this echoes Rachel Hunt’s recent suggestion, mirroring an earlier plea from Hayden Lorimer, that we need to engage with
neglected rural geographies past and present however ‘unfashionable’ and ‘unlikely’. And notwithstanding the blossoming of critical soil studies – in geography and beyond – the cultural as well as the rural historical has been less well represented.

Are we not, the critic might ask, in danger of romanticising something that ultimately was written in exploitation, soil the medium of toil for wage labouring? If words such as ‘enchantment’ and ‘sensuous’ are not prominent entries in the Marxian phrasebook, the analysis offered here speaks directly to the destabilising impacts of changing relationships with the soil brought about by enclosure and other forms of agricultural ‘improvement’. It also brings our attention to the acts of defiance, resistance even, in finding meaning and connection in the soil even when land was made private and a living now rooted in labouring for others’ profit. Indeed, for the profound sense of loss in Kitchen and Clare’s writing – and, in a differing way, that of Eliot and Hardy – there is also a ‘hidden transcript’ of resistance in their continued physic ownership and connection with the land that precisely mirrors James Scott’s analysis of everyday forms of resistance amongst dispossessed rural workers in south-east Asia.

We also know, for instance, that onetime habitués of the fields of rural England often tried to make sense of their alienation from the countryside in their new urban and industrial lives by thinking about the natural world and seeking solace when they could by retreating to the fields. Indeed, this might not be a conventional ‘history from below’ with its emphases on the effects of the material dislocations rendered by agrarian capitalism and the concurrent making private of once common spaces – these long-term processes that intensified in the long 19th century. Rather, it speaks to other senses of displacement and loss, and to the way in which their environmental knowledges and entanglements provided an anchor against these changes. The soil was important to the labourer because it was the matter that shaped so much of their paid work and domestic lives but also because it was more than matter, more than muck, it could give meaning, joy, satisfaction (as well as the proxy for vexations over aching and dirty bodies, manually tilling the soil being irremissibly hard work).

There is, in short, a need for human geographers to (re)engage with the soil to help ground our earth writings, and here cultural geographers might lead the way methodologically and conceptually. By attending to archives of meaning and feeling, to turn to the earth writings of novelists, poets, biographers and diarists, is not just to enrich accounts of living with the environment and with environmental change but to bring obscured worlds to mind. And given the urgency of thinking anew how we might be with the environment, to write such histories has never been more vital. To embrace a cultural, a literary geographical way of reading the past forces us to think about what being with the world meant – and what is at stake in the here-and-now.

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Notes

6. This view has been popularised by G. Monbiot, Regenesis: Feeding the World without Devouring the Planet (London: Penguin UK, 2022).
47. Evans, *The Pattern under the Plough*, pp. 120, 121.
48. George Sturt wrote under the name George Bourne which is reflected in the citations. G. Bourne, *Change in the Village* (London: Duckworth, 1912), p. 192.
55. To go back to the 1780s, George Crabbe claimed that enclosure changed the very environmental basis of being: ‘There poppies, nodding, mock the hope of toil/There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil’. Here, the degradation of the soil was at once literal and metaphorical, all life now sterile: G. Crabbe, *The Village*, Book 1 (London: J. Dodsley, 1783).
63. Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, p. 76.
65. Navvies, as Michael Macilwee has shown, were ‘particularly dangerous’ when provoked ‘since they took home their sharp-edged spades, which doubled as weapons’: M. Macilwee, *The Liverpool Underworld: Crime in the City, 1750-1900* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 59.
66. Bourne, *Change in the Village*, p. 3.
74. Kitchen, *Brother to the Ox*, p. 11.
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Carl J. Griffin is professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex and visiting professor in the Centre for History at the University of the Highlands and Islands. A scholar of our rural pasts, the main foci of his work are protest and popular politics, agrarian change, and human–environment relations in the 18th and early 19th centuries. His latest books include *Remembering Protest in Britain Since 1500: Memory, Materiality and the Landscape* (with Briony McDonagh, 2018), *Moral Ecologies: Histories of Conservation, Dispossession and Resistance* (with Roy Jones and Iain Robertson, 2019), and *The Politics of Hunger: Protest, Poverty and Policy in England, c. 1750–c. 1840* (2020). Since 2014 he has been a co-editor of the journal *Rural History*. 