In May 1816, between fifty and sixty starving farm-workers got drunk at the Globe Inn, Littleport, just north of Ely. They said they were angry at the high price of bread; in reality, they no longer found life supportable. They charged through the village, wrecking everything. The vicar threatened to shoot them, but lost his nerve and fled to Ely. Legend relates that the Bishop of Ely, terrified, tried to leave, but his rear end was of such lateral generosity that he could not get into his carriage without his guards compressing him into it with their musket-butts.¹ The riot, which spread to Downham Market and Ely itself, was put down by the militia, and five of the rioters were hanged.²

Neither the desperation of the rioters nor the Bishop’s embarrassment (which would make an excellent satirical image), could ever find places in the work of Robert Bloomfield, who was born at Honington, not too far away from Littleport, over the border in Suffolk, and is buried at Campton, now just down the A10 in Hertfordshire. Giles, the Farmer’s Boy, writes William J. Christmas on p.31 of this new book, “willingly submits to the old (supposedly) natural order of things, and does not represent any of the disruptive, levelling energy that was everywhere in evidence among rural and urban laborers in the 1790s”. “Or”, we could add, “in the 1800s … and the 1810s …” No working-class person could write disruptive, levelling poetry in the “Romantic” period, and expect to escape prosecution. It was the conservative Crabbe who, addressing his hypocrite lecteur, depicted agricultural life most honestly:

> Or will you deem them amply paid in health,  
> Labour’s fair child, that languishes with wealth?  
> Go then! and see them rising with the sun,  
> Through a long course of daily toil to run;  
> See them beneath the Dog-star’s raging heat,  
> When the knees tremble and the temples beat;  
> Behold them, leaning on their scythes, look o’er  
> The labour past, and toils to come explore;  
> See them alternate suns and showers engage,  
> And hoard up aches and anguish for their age;  
> Through fens and marshy moors their steps pursue,  
> When their warm pores imbibe the evening dew;  
> Then own that labour may as fatal be  
> To these thy slaves, as thine excess to thee.³

Robert Bloomfield’s was an unhappy career, and an unhappy life. He was author of one of the best-selling poems of the “Romantic” period (The Farmer’s Boy), but excessive generosity, a business crash, and a wife who donated his money to the cause of Joanna Southcott, ensured that he barely profited by it. He died in poverty, the subscription which his friends tried to raise for him having failed. His sense that it would have been better for him and his family if he had stayed a cobbler, or a

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²: For a full account, see A.J.Peacock, Bread or Blood (forward by E.P.Thompson, Gollancz, 1965).  
³: Crabbe, The Village, I, 140-53.
designer of Aeolian harps, and had written no poetry at all, is seen in the letter he wrote to John Clare on July 25th 1820. He had just been given Clare’s first book of poems:

They have given me and my family an uncommon pleasure, and they will have the same effect on all kindred minds and that’s enough; for, as for writing rhimes for Clods and sticks and expecting them to read them, I never found any fun in that in all my life, and I have past your age <24> {26} years.”

The book gives many insights into Bloomfield’s life and work, but the essays in it show no consensus about the circumstances of his initial, and enormous success. “Bloomfield,” writes William J. Christmas in the first essay, “seems particularly careful not to let explicit references to contemporary politics derail his first major entrance into literary culture” (p.45). Here he credits Bloomfield with a degree of control, not just over the content, but over the publication of *The Farmer’s Boy*, which he never possessed at all, for he was so far from being in charge of its publication that he didn’t even know it had been published. The entire text had been re-written, prefaced, and given classical appendices by Capel Lofft, the “radical Whig” squire to whom Bloomfield’s brother George had innocently shown it. This process is summarised on p.50 by Bruce Graver in his excellent essay on the illustrations to *The Farmer’s Boy*, and outlined at greater length by Simon White on p.178, at the start of his central consideration of Bloomfield’s *My Old Oak Table*. Graver writes that Lofft “corrected the spelling and grammar of the poem”: White writes that Lofft “did not consider it necessary to involve Bloomfield in the preparation of the text”. Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee, however, in another fine essay, about the vaccination poem *Good Tidings, or News from the Farm*, offer a more radical assessment of Lofft’s intervention:

… Bloomfield found himself subject – in public – to other’s proprietorial manipulation of his words: he had glimpsed the tantalizing and democratic possibility of communicating directly with a mass readership only to discover that it was a mirage … he could not be a “man speaking to men.” (pp.144-5)

The riddle inherent in Bloomfield’s wretched story is, do any of his published poems show him as a “man speaking to men”? Is it his voice which speaks about vaccination, about the Wye Valley, about his mother’s spindle, or about his old oak table – or is it the voice which Capel Lofft had trained him to use – the one that would sell? What did he think when he read these lines from the first edition of his most famous poem?

O’er the cold earth she crawls to her retreat;
Quitting the cott’s warm walls unhous’d to lie,
Or share the swine’s impure and narrow sty …

What he’d actually written was

Oer the cold earth she crawls to her retreat
Quitting the cott’s warm walls in filth to lie,
Where the swine grunting yields up half his sty …

4: B.L.Egerton. MSS. 2245 f.186.
Lofft had perhaps changed “in filth” to “unhoused” in order to remind us of *King Lear* but I doubt it. The “mad girl” pictured here is what we’d call a victim of acute depression, and has not, so far as Bloomfield shows us, suffered from “paternal tyranny and erotic deprivation”, as Donna Landry implies on p.264. When the girl finds that the “grunting” swine “yields” half his living space to her, she discovers sympathy from the animal world where the human world shows none. “… share the swine’s impure and narrow sty”, Lofft’s replacement, implies on the contrary that even a disorientated human can show a beast condescension. Bloomfield’s original lines “broke the species barrier”, as Fulford and Lee put it on p.147; as Donna Landry puts it on p.263, they identify “with animals as needy and desiring fellow creatures”: but Lofft the radical Whig would tolerate no such strange stuff.

The original compassionate thought is at one with the most powerful and disturbing section of *The Farmer’s Boy*, about the suffering post-horse:

> … trembling under complicated pains,  
> Prone from his nostrils, darting on the ground,  
> His breath emitted floats in clouds around:  
> Drops chase each other down his chest and sides,  
> And spatter’d mud his native colour hides:  
> Through his swol’n veins the boiling torrent flows,  
> And every nerve a separate torture knows.  
> His harness loo’sd, he wellcomes eager-ey’d,  
> The pail’s full draught that quivers by his side;  
> And joys to see the wellknown Stable door,  
> As the starv’d mariner the friendly shore.⁶

… and at one with another section of great pity and protest, that on the docking of horses’ tails, about which William Christmas writes very well on pp.34-7.

Bloomfield ceased being a farm labourer at the age of fourteen, and had been too puny to take part in any activity more demanding physically than tending cattle and crow-scaring. He could never have written about the more exhausting work, such as threshing, described in all its horror by Stephen Duck, in *The Thresher’s Labour*.

These essays are a mixed bag. Mina Gorji writes a very subtle intertextual study, linking Gray’s *Elegy*, the image of Bloomfield as one whom “failure” invested with “literary pedigree”, and Clare’s *The Mole*. But Donna Landry’s excellent essay on Georgic Ecology only mentions Bloomfield here and there. John Goodridge’s, on the feminine narrative voice in Bloomfield and Clare, would be stronger had he located any feminine narrative voices in Bloomfield (he finds virtually none). Bridget Keenan concedes on only the second page (p.196), of her essay on the “varieties of religious experience” to be found in Bloomfield, that “Bloomfield is by no means a poet with an extensive or dogmatic religious agenda”, and indeed her essay locates no religious agenda at all.

There are some other strange moments. Admirers of Crabbe (who gets very few mentions in the book), will be startled by the statement, on p.90, that “the River Wye … is (unlike Suffolk) a site rich in literary association”. On p.133 George IV becomes Princess Charlotte’s brother (he was her father); and on p.181 Clare is made to

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address Bloomfield as “Brother Bard, and fellow labourer” (that’s the phrase with which Bloomfield addressed Clare).

But for those interested in Bloomfield, the book is a mine of useful ideas.