John Younger, Writer on Angling, Poet and Shoemaker

John Younger, born at Longnewton in the parish of Ancrum, Roxburghshire, on 5 July 1785, was a Scottish writer on angling, a shoemaker, and poet. He was youngest of the six children of William Younger, a Borders shoemaker, and Jean Henderson. His grandfather, John Younger, employed as a gardener in England, lost all his money in an unlucky speculation. He himself was put to the last when barely nine. He soon became an unrivalled angler.

When life got easier for him he married (9 August 1811) Agnes Riddle, and settled at St Boswells, some three miles from Longnewton, as the village shoemaker. Having bought a copy of Burns for sixpence at St Boswells fair, John began to feel that he too was a poet.

But it was not until 1834 that he published a little volume (in the metre of 'Don Juan'), entitled 'Thoughts as they Rise'.

In September 1839 he wrote 'River Angling for Salmon and Trout, more particularly as practised in the Tweed and its Tributaries'. It was highly praised in the 'Field' for its 'practical' value. He was as keen an observer of men as of fish, and he became courted alike as the most proficient Scots angler and as the 'Tweedside Gnostic'. He both hated and despised the rich, nor was he at any pains to conceal his views. Of a duke to whom it was once suggested he might appeal, he said roughly, 'We have no natural sympathies, save eating, that is, when a poor man has to eat'.

He had a disgust, partly envious, for 'the classics,' and he looked on the Waverley Novels as 'old piper stories' and monstrous caricatures of Scottish manners. The 'baronial hall' was his abhorrence. In 1847, at the age of sixty-two, he won a prize for an essay on 'The Temporal Advantage of the Sabbath in relation to the Working Classes'.

He went up to London to receive his prize from the Earl of Shaftesbury, and on his return was banqueted at home where he was extremely popular. About 1849 he was appointed village postmaster, but the routine work proved beyond his patience, and in January 1856 he threw up the post and returned to cobbling. He died very poor, but honest and industrious to the last, on 18 June 1860, and was buried beside his 'Nannie' (often celebrated in his writings; she died in 1856) in St Boswells kirkyard. He left some rich materials for a 'memoir' of himself, to which he had given the title 'Obscurities in Private Life developed; or Robinson Crusoe untravelled.' These were recast into an 'Autobiography of John Younger,' and published at Kelso in 1881.
His best thoughts are contained in this and in two bulky volumes of correspondence which remain unpublished. Good engraved portraits of Younger are prefixed both to the 'Autobiography' and to 'River Angling.'