Unknown London

Despite Colquhoun’s attempts to reveal the nature of the casual residuum, the sheer unknowability of the poor inhabiting the wider metropolitan landscape served only to intensify prevailing anxieties. In response, a considerable body of literature emerged. Best remembered are the writings of Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew, but these were a small part of the nineteenth-century endeavour by social reformers, novelists, evangelicals, illustrators and cartographers to organize new knowledges of modern London and the poor who inhabited its inaccessible, seemingly primordial courts, rookeries and alleys. Neither were they the first, for these writers drew inspiration from earlier work. It is thus to Pierce Egan, George Smeeton, George Cruikshank, James Grant and others of the early nineteenth-century literary subculture that we have to look for the defining moment.

Concern with the dissembling potentiality of the poor focused endeavour to know London as a modern city at that paradoxical moment when the realization of this vision came to be recognized as problematic. Toward the close of the eighteenth century a range of issues around aesthetics, power and class featured in urban texts with unprecedented power and complexity. Previous writers, most notably Alexander Pope in The Dunciad and John Gay in Trivia and The Beggar’s Opera, had engaged actively with the plurality of London life, assuming uncritically that it could be described and represented. The profound change in sensibility provoked by fears of disorder undermined this confidence, and from the turn of the century writers approached the mapping and representation of London with faltering appreciation of its immense, labyrinthine totality now quite beyond the limits of comprehension found in earlier urban rhetoric. Thus in Blake, Wordsworth, De Quincey and of course Dickens
emerged a more open-ended and circumspect exploration of London's
dynamism:

[W]e come to see the concatenation of discourses of the sublime and the
outgrowth of terror in the face of urban immensity, the perplexing question
of the formation of an urban bourgeois identity in the face of anonymity, the
concern over proximity between East and West, rich and poor, and the fear of
contamination in both a literal and metaphorical sense…. The city in the
first part of the nineteenth century is written as a series of subjects [always
plural] always in excess of expression and comprehension.²

These impulses, however, were not exclusively the concern of Romantic
writers. The same sense of incomprehensibility pervaded popular literary
appropriations of the metropolis that were beginning to appear. In the re-
markable opening sections of the hugely popular *Life in London*, Pierce
Egan struggles to define the epistemological and methodological under-
pinnings of his approach to the metropolis. 'An accurate knowledge of the
manners, habits, and feelings of a brave and free people', he claims, 'is not
to be acquired in the CLOSET, nor is it to be derived from the formal
routine precepts of tutors.'

It is only by means of a free and unrestrained intercourse with society … that
an intimate acquaintance is to be obtained with Englishmen: for this pur-
pose it is necessary to view their pastimes, to hear their remarks, and, from
such sources, to be enabled to study their character.³

Egan's desire was to represent the extraordinary material plurality of met-
ropolitan life. For him London is a ‘complete cyclopaedia’ wherein the
extremes and paradoxes of life happily coexist. To capture it, he provides a
‘camera obscura view’ for the reader in which the visual works alongside
the textual, if not always in harmony. Here was an imagination that rep-resented a fundamental shift in the status of the observing subject. It
emerged from the novel ways of organizing vision in the early years of the
nineteenth century as artists and writers broke with classical modes of
representation, and set in motion the modernization of vision. Obvious
manifestations were the changes in imagery promoted by new systems of
representation, but more fundamental was the massive reorganization of
knowledge that impacted on human capacities to produce, desire and per-
ceive.⁴ Such arguments have considerable implications for the ways in
which the history of visual art in the nineteenth century have been
thought. They suggest, for example, that modernist art of the 1870s and
1880s was a delayed symptom, made possible by the systemic shift in
perception witnessed some fifty years earlier. And they help us to
contextualize the problematic relationship between visual and textual
materials evident in works like *Life in London*. Of equal significance, how-
ever, is the light shed on literary endeavour. For what emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century was a new observer, operating in a range of social and artistic practices, and scientific and philosophical domains of knowledge, who attempted to appropriate the dislocating experiences of urban environments. This ‘ambulatory observer shaped by a convergence of new urban spaces, technologies, and new economic and symbolic functions of images and products’ abandoned the dominant, fixed and seemingly stable perceptions of the previous century, and sought a truth ‘abstracted from any founding site or referent’.5

This new observer attempted to record his observations, creating a body of urban literature that constituted a formative moment in the cultural history of the metropolis.6 Produced in the period from 1815 to 1845 by a relatively small number of writers, publishers and illustrators working on the fringes of a bohemian culture, this literature commanded unprecedented levels of attention from a reading public. In its innovative, diverse and self-conscious attempts to grasp the complex totality of London, the literature can be seen as an early popular modernism that laid the foundation for the writings of Dickens, Mayhew and their successors, and for popular Victorian theatre and graphic illustration.

This recognition of the important – but ultimately limited – practice of observation adopted by Egan and his contemporaries is critical to an understanding of their literary appropriation. The vision of the wider social drama of metropolitan life they offered was made possible by the liminality of the position they occupied within class relations. Thus, in contrast to the dominant visions held by planners and cartographers, and evident in elite town guides during the improvements to the built infrastructure of London, these writers attempted to capture high and low life through participation in and observation of their forms. Ultimately, however, they withdrew, and as flâneurs looked vicariously from a safe distance at the performance or the spectacle. In so doing, they represented, often in comic form, the troubling manifestations of poverty rather than revealing them through critique.7

Life in London is a work of transition. Although able to capture the instabilities of a totalizing vision and hence prepare the path for nineteenth-century literary appropriations of the metropolis, it simultaneously was indebted to eighteenth-century genres. Tricks-of-the-town travelogues in which unsophisticated gentlemen from the country are exposed to the various frauds and villainies of London during a tour conducted by a knowledgeable friend provide the narrative form for the adventures of the three heroes. And there are passing references to elite town guides in the descriptions of venues such as the Royal Academy and the curious detour around Carlton Palace. But from the outset Egan is determined to distance the work from hack writing:
That intense study formerly required to make up the character of an AUTHOR is at the present period (1820) greatly relieved, as it should seem that LITERATURE has kept pace with the new buildings in the Metropolis, and new street and new books have been produced, as it were, by magic. This rapid improvement made in the literary world, is owing to those extensive manufacturers of new works, Messrs. SCISSORS and PASTE.8

Instead, his invocation is to the legacy of eighteenth-century literature manifest in the “excellence, NOVELTY, and naivete”, which still hover about the heads of the MODERN WRITERS, who “sit in the whirlpool of LITERATURE, and direct the STORM” in the Metropolis.9 ‘The Metropolis is now before me’, he concludes, ‘POUSSIN never had a more luxuriant, variegated, and interesting subject for a landscape; … if I cannot command success, at least, it shall not be averred that I did not exert myself to deserve it.’10

It is in this attempt to portray – and express – the dislocating materiality of the city that Egan reveals the stirrings of modernist sensibility. For him, the metropolis is a complete CYCLOPAEDIA…. Every SQUARE in the metropolis is a sort of map well worthy of exploring…. There is not a street also in London, but what may be compared to a large or small volume of intelligence … a court or alley must be obscure indeed, if it does not afford some remarks; and even the poorest cellar contains some trait or other, in unison with the manners and feelings of this great city.11

London thus offers travellers the supreme opportunity to see life in all of its manifestations from the ‘high-mettled CORINTHIAN of St James’s, swaddled in luxury, down to the needy FLUE-FAKER of Wapping, born without a shirt’. On this voyage of (self)-discovery they come to recognize the necessity of improvement by appreciating the ‘advantages that experience holds forth’.12

Jon Bee in A Living Picture of London, for 1828 is also alert to the profound changes in literary activity attendant on a sense of crisis in the imperial metropolis. The past quarter of a century, he argues, has witnessed the rise and progress of the ‘present extended taste for reading’, much of which was centred in London.13 This ‘march of intellect’ has swept aside resistance from a corrupt state oligarchy which had precipitated a crisis in empire through the loss of the thirteen colonies, ferment in Europe and threat of yet further loss of India. From this struggle for power, the ‘spirit of inquiry’ has gone forth promoting new approaches to the administration of the nation, improvements in manufacturing, and advances in the arts and sciences. Initially, this spirit was tempered by a literature which, although increasing rapidly in volume, remained ‘of the most mawky nature’. But the swelling tide of demand for substantial authors among
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studious clerks, journeymen and mechanics was insatiable: ‘all read, in some manner or other, se defensio, as ‘twere, and the accumulation of little libraries on every floor and in every lodging’ marked out a new reading public which soon abandoned ‘flimsy novelists and hackneyed “histories”’.

For John Duncombe in The Dens of London (1835), ‘Age of inquiry’ best described this new spirit. Ancient romantic tales of love and heroism were no longer fashionable. The ‘insipid stuff of the rhymer, and the equally sentimental trash of the getter-up of fiction’ have been superseded by more rational publications such as The Spectator and The Tatler which are founded on truth and bear ‘the stamp of newness’. This change was fostered by a reading public which has turned away from the ‘exaggerated imaginings of a diseased brain’ and toward the writings of Scott in which could be found ‘History beautifully blended with Fiction, or rather Truth, accurate descriptions of nature, and correct pictures of life, both high and low’. The present desire for change has engendered a new sensitivity to the condition of the people which even Egan’s ‘by-gone piece of notoriety’ was unable to capture.

The sense of historicity is evident in other publications. George Smeeton’s popular Doings in London uses detailed information to convey the historical lineages of London’s modernity. Most striking are the statistics on the capital of companies that collapsed in the financial crisis of 1825. Included ‘as a curious and valuable record of the gullibility of the citizens of this overgrown metropolis’, they simultaneously provide a modern perspective on the scale of loss that can be incurred through fraud in the financial capital of the world. A similar inventory appeared in How to Live in London, also published in 1828. But it was the denial of fictional accounts that most defined their distinctive approaches to the representation of London. ‘No fiction of the brain, no imaginary character, make any part of these pages’, stated Jon Bee in the Preface to A Living Picture of London:

I protest against, as I utterly eschew, all attempts at teaching this most perilous of worldly knowledge, by the machinery of ‘pretty novel’ or ‘amusing narrative,’ to which some excellent cerebral writers of the present day seem fondly addicted, those modern Bunyans, who couch whatever they write ‘under the similitude of a dream’.

Overall, this body of literature signalled a further shift in discursive appropriations of metropolitan life. Produced at a time of renewed anxiety about the poor, it represented a faltering attempt to resolve the problems attendant on the continued unknowability of London low life. John Badcock’s The London Guide remained encased within the eighteenth-century genre of the gentleman’s vade-mecum, revealing little beyond the
activities of the criminalized poor and their use of canting slang. He seeks, however, to confer empirical veracity on the urban travelogue by inclusion of material from seemingly authoritative surveys. Reference is constantly made to Colquhoun’s *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, and the evidence submitted to the Select Committee on the State of the Police.

The work of Egan, Smeeton and other members of the bohemian subculture was part of an important transitional phase in the literary representation of the metropolis. Out of this complex, plural literature struggling to capture the confused and contradictory totality of the metropolis emerged Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew. Their links with Egan in particular were powerful. Egan’s celebration of the exuberant diversity of metropolitan life through chance encounters with its characters provided inspiration for Dickens (best evidenced in the early novels *Sketches of Boz* and *Pickwick Papers*), who creatively developed an urban vision by making these characters familiar and knowable. In Dickens, empathy displaced amused detachment; readers responded because the mimetic realism in the novels was one they recognized sympathetically. But this remained a middle-class or lower-middle-class sympathy, for Dickens rarely revealed the poor, even less the working class who are almost entirely absent. Occasionally, members of the criminal poor and metropolitan low life feature, but they are not offered as representative of a wider culture. In his novels the poor were sensed as Egan sensed them – as minor and shadowy characters who provided detail and contrast to the narrative rather than driving it forward. Thus although a sense of London’s poverty is always there, it is as a backdrop to the main characters. Ultimately, we know little about the lives of the various characters who are forced to suffer the quotidian oppression of poverty.

Mayhew took Egan in a different direction. The turmoil of street life encountered by the traveller is in Mayhew given voice by intimate observation and detailed recording of the experiences of the urban poor. His original project to map metropolitan poverty as a whole was never realized; what remains for the most part is explorations of the street sellers, performers and labourers who constituted a relatively small section of the London poor. But from these studies we can for the first time begin to know something of the histories, cultures and economies that structured the lived experiences of the street poor, and their emotional and cognitive responses.

The trinity of Egan, Dickens and Mayhew helped to define the course of urban exploration for the next thirty years. Their projects may have been distinct, but they shared a concern to reveal London’s diversity at a time of anxiety over the threat posed by the poor, and simultaneously exerted an influence, the complex, individual strands of which can be untangled only
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with difficulty. This task was mediated, however, by the influence of evangelical narratives, which by mid century when the massive intervention into metropolitan poverty was under way were being read by increasing numbers of people. This intervention and the literature to which it gave rise also helped to shape perceptions to the extent that in some writings congruence with the genre established by urban explorers was almost complete.

Metropolitan evangelicalism

Toward the end of the eighteenth century London provided a distinct focus for evangelical activity. Here were to be found the Clapham Sect and the headquarters of leading societies. And we have seen that strong evangelical influence was felt in the activities and writings of the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor and the Mendicity Society, as well as local bodies such as the Association for the Relief of the Industrious Poor of Spitalfields. The most sustained intervention, however, began in the 1830s when evangelicals singled out the metropolis as a mission field of such importance that a national effort was required. From that time evangelicalism, with organization powerful enough to transcend denominational differences, embarked on an extraordinary campaign to bring the gospel to the metropolitan poor.

In Lighten their Darkness Donald Lewis has described well evangelical organizations and their armies of agents during the most intense period of activity from 1828 to 1860.21 Inspired by the efforts and writings of Thomas Chalmers, who in his Glasgow parish twenty years earlier had claimed success for operations based on the locality, they directed their energies to aggressive proselytization through systematic house-to-house canvassing. The largest of the organizations was the London City Mission (LCM), founded in 1835 by the combined efforts of David Nasmith, Baptist Noel and Thomas Buxton. Although in their background and social philosophy there was little in common, they shared a vision that despite the misgivings of the church establishment the metropolitan poor could be reached through determined interdenominational effort. Nasmith provided the initial impulse, announcing on his arrival in the metropolis his intent to establish missions similar to those he had pioneered in Glasgow and Dublin under the influence of Chalmers. But the ground had been prepared by the publication a few months earlier of Baptist Noel’s The State of the Metropolis Considered.22 Drawing heavily on Colquhoun’s statistics, the book reverberated with familiar concerns about the condition of the metropolitan poor. Mendicancy, alcohol, Sabbath breaking, gambling and robbery, he argued, were endemic witnesses to the moral destitution of the poor, in the face of which the church had proved ineffective.
THE OTHER EMPIRE

The attendant demand for new initiatives was a clarion call to evangelicals. London’s ‘mass of heathenism … more revolting than that of Benares or Calcutta’ has failed to attract the same attention directed to foreign missions:

England sends out her missionaries to the coasts of Guiana, to the tribes of Southern Africa, to the islands of the South Pacific, to North and South India, to Malacca and Canton; but 518,000 souls in the metropolis, within easy reach of hundreds of Christian ministers, and of thousands of intelligent Christian laymen with wealth and leisure, are almost entirely overlooked.23

Extracts from the book were reproduced in the leading evangelical journal The Record, and quoted widely in sermons and lectures.24 Nasmith recruited the active support also of Thomas Buxton, who not only agreed to become the LCM’s treasurer, but also in the first precarious years guaranteed its financial survival by eliciting donations from his friends and family. Doctrinal stability, however, was rather more troublesome. Fearing that the interdenominational character of the LCM was being challenged by Nasmith’s uncompromising independence, Anglican examiners resigned. But the critical blow was dealt by Noel, who in 1837 threatened resignation, forcing Nasmith to withdraw. Thereafter, effective control passed into the hands of Anglicans, although committee posts were shared equally with Nonconformists. On the basis of this new-found cooperation, the fortunes of the LCM were transformed. The number of agents employed increased from 50 in 1839 to 101 in 1844, eventually rising to 375 in 1860.25 Since each agent was expected to visit the same 500 families every month, this constituted a massive intervention. In its 1855 Annual Report the LCM claimed to have made 1,484,563 visits in the previous year, during which over two million religious tracts had been distributed.26 Agents were instructed to read and interpret portions of the scriptures, foregrounding the core tenets of evangelical belief. Those families without scriptures were provided with tracts approved by the committee in the hope that someone could read. Politics was studiously avoided. A daily journal was kept in which the agent was expected to record accurately facts relating to the circumstances of each family.27

Evangelical thinking of the poor during the period of intense activity in the metropolis was in many respects a faltering attempt to come to terms with the apocalyptic vision of Malthus.28 Unfettered increase in population was perceived as the single most serious threat to the divinely ordered world, in response to which evangelicals sought methods to reassert its natural harmony. Optimists turned outward, stressing the capacity of humans in productive exertion to overcome the pathological consequences of overpopulation. The more pessimistically minded, on the
other hand, interpreted the demographic calculus as a divine means of encouraging inner reform and sexual abstention among the lower orders, thereby erecting a ‘system of moral theology, in which prudence and chastity were not merely rational responses to the crisis, but spiritual imperatives in their own right’.29

The practical consequences of this can be seen in the intellectual formation and activities of Chalmers. In evidence to the Select Committee on Mendicity, and in his *Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns*,30 Chalmers stated forcefully that intensive house-to-house visits were the only means of effecting moral regeneration of society. Evangelical mission-aries, by promoting restraint, virtue and self-help among the poor, could provide a more lasting and humane solution to the problems of mendicity and vagrancy than any amount of reform to the system of poor relief. The poor may well be in need of material benefit, but without spiritual enlightenment it would provide at best temporary relief which in the long term would be self-defeating. ‘I should count the salvation of a single soul of more value than the deliverance of a whole empire from pauperism’31 may have overstated his case, but it suggested where his priorities lay.

Narrative forms of salvation were evident in evangelical writings throughout the long nineteenth century (pp. 90–1). Mass publication began in the troubled political climate of the 1790s when a group of church and lay workers led by the Clapham Sect sponsored anti-Jacobin and moral tracts. Hannah More was prominent in organizing a series of cheap repository tracts; by 1796 an estimated two million were in circulation.32 Three years later the Religious Tract Society (RTS) was formed. From these activities emerged the vast tract literature published by the LCM, most notably tract tales for the young, millions of which were distributed by agents in their mission to evangelize the metropolitan poor. But the narratives shaped also the spiritual autobiographies of those working among the poor, and the lengthy commentaries on the state of moral and physical depravity they encountered.

The rapid increase in evangelical literature in this period was part of the massive effort conducted by various societies to evangelize London. This level of activity transformed knowledge of the poor. Lay agents became familiar figures on the urban landscape, as a result of which many developed a sympathetic concern for the material as well as spiritual welfare of the families they visited. Metropolitan sanitation, lodgings and ragged schools were of particular interest, and the information agents acquired on these and related issues through direct acquaintance with the poor was sought increasingly by members of parliament and other middle-class social reformers. And it was to city missionaries that Mayhew turned for guided tours around the slums.33
I have attempted to demonstrate that approaches to an understanding of the metropolitan poor in the early nineteenth century have to be viewed with due recognition of the imperial context. As urban travellers and evangelicals came to confront the dogged persistence of the poor at a time of perceived progress, and the threat that the poor and colonial subjects posed to the future of the empire, imperial sentiment intensified. We need to be sensitive, however, to the contrasts that continued to exist between these two genres, particularly on the question of progress. In the writings of Egan, Smeeton and other members of their literary subculture, traces remain of eighteenth-century tricks-of-the-town narratives, but they are subordinated by a celebration of London’s quotidian plurality in an age of enlightenment and intellect. ‘LIFE IN LONDON’, states Egan, ‘is … to admire the good and to avoid the vicious; but never to entertain an idea, that however bad and depraved some individuals may appear to be, that they are past any attempt to reclaim them from their evil ways.’ Thus recognition of the ‘waste of wickedness’ that is London is muted by comic displacement of low-life haunts, and joyous, cross-cultural encounters between their denizens and the three heroes representing ‘some of the worthiest, most tender-hearted, liberal minds, and charitable dispositions, which ornament London, and render it the delight and happiness of society’.

Smeeton, in his desire to ‘show vice and deception in all their real deformity’, displays a more leaden concern with the criminal propensities of London’s poor, but at no time is this linked to an apocalyptic vision of the future. Above all, his project was reliably to capture the same contradictoriness of the city’s ‘vast emporium of happiness and misery, splendour and wretchedness’. And if Badcock has little of Smeeton’s precocious eclecticism, there is a similar concern to avoid ‘fiction of the brain [and] imaginary character’ in revealing the darker side of London life. In the end we are left with the thought that in spite of the litany of criminal activities described, the march of intellect and spirit of inquiry reigned: ‘happiness, comfort, health, ease, and progressive improvement, are perceptible everywhere’, he concluded.

Contrast these writings with the stirrings of evangelical zeal in the metropolis. Noel’s pioneering study of religious instruction in the metropolis employed detailed statistical information with much greater rigour and coherence than the early urban explorers. His purpose, however, was not to capture London’s plurality, but to reveal the potentially grave consequences of religious neglect. Over half a million souls were living without religious instruction of any kind. This ‘mass of heathenism … more untaught in Divine truth than the New Zealanders, more unregarded than...
the Chinese’, 40 has led to incalculable mischief. Labourers fail to attend church on the Sabbath, choosing instead to imbibe the poison on ‘various blasphemous and revolutionary unstamped publications’, saunter in suburban tea-gardens, or revel in drunken orgies. The consequence is mendicancy and crime on unprecedented scales, and an ‘unspeakably painful contemplation of this mass of immortal beings ... without God and without hope’.41

This deep sense of foreboding does not pervade the more racy writings of James Grant. He admits to recent and general moral improvement, but simultaneously claims that among sections of the lower classes there is room for greater still. The chapter on Bartholomew and Greenwich fairs in Sketches in London, for example, concludes with a sustained condemnation of popular culture. Such fairs are the ‘relics of a barbarous age, and were established for the sake of an ignorant and brutalized people. They are altogether unworthy of the nineteenth century: they are especially unworthy of a civilized and Christian land.’42 Worrying also are penny theatres, the recent rapid increase of which has done great mischief in corrupting the youth. Abolition of fairs and popular theatres, therefore, is now an urgent matter since it would lead to an improvement in the morals of the lower classes, and amelioration of the conditions in which so many of them live.

Over the next decade, this sense of the corruption and demoralization intensified, and pessimism about the future was voiced with increasing shrillness. Out of this dystopian vision emerged the notion of race, used as a critical referent to help explain and express frustration over the continued failure to eradicate the pathological effects of poverty. To understand this process we need to go beyond stereotypical configurations of race. An awareness of the use of pejorative stereotypes, gleaned from the occasional isolated and decontextualized quotation, provides at best partial access to the problem because they were often merely manifestations of certain contemporary linguistic practices rather than the logical outcome of racial theory. Consequently, racist epithets do not reveal – because they have no necessary relationship to – metanarratives of racial formation. This is why an appreciation of the process of racialization, seen through the optic of broader theories and narratives that informed the construction of the poor as a race beneath or apart, assumes significance.43 Furthermore, acknowledgement of the influence of racial and social theories has to be tempered by the recognition that they were adapted and implemented in ways that lacked rigour, coherence and consistency.44

In 1850 Thomas Beames, a preacher and assistant at St James, Westminster, wrote The Rookeries of London. 45 In its pages he surveyed the condition of the metropolis, contemplating how the terrible plight of the poor could be located within the unbroken ascent of the English nation.
When, he asked, did they appear?

True, thoughts of Rookeries recall, if not old Saxon times, yet times when we Anglo-Saxons were one people, ere the First and Second Charles had driven out the stern Republicanism destined to bear such fruit in the next century, ere the traveller’s gig broke down in a Cheshire village, and a night’s lodging at the hospitable home of a stranger gave him a bride, and that bride gave the world George Washington, – ere, in a word, the Anglo-Saxon name, language and strong manly spirit had become common to vast nations in both hemispheres.46

And why?

We like to know for what particular offences the justice and the wisdom of England thought proper to consign the dark and comfortless dwellings of the poor for whom religion bids us care, and in whose preservation is preserved a nation’s well being, at what particular era the custom was introduced, whether refractory Barons inflicted confinements in such tenements as a punishment on the commons who supported the sovereign, or whether when cities and boroughs first achieved municipal privileges they thus tamed the spirits of rude retainers.47

Whenever they first appeared, or for what reasons, the poor remained, constituting a greater threat to the future of the English nation than revolutionary upheaval:

Strong as we are, secure as we have been, we may yet bear to listen to the teaching of history; its lessons are for us – for us, round whom the middle class reared an impregnable rampart, and who have lived through convulsions which shook to the centre the great powers of Europe. That splendid monument of wisdom and courage, the English Constitution, may defy minor attacks – afford to despise them; other nations are only now winning the privileges we enjoy – are opening their eyes slowly to the light which has long been our birthright. Yet with all this, if we forebear to renovate where time has ravaged, to remedy abuses which none can palliate, the day of retribution must come, – our children may possess an heritage blasted by our neglect, and the swords their fathers have sharpened pierce them to the heart.48

Faced with such prospects, England must once again assume the mantle of responsibility and embark on a mission to save not only herself but the civilized world:

England, our beloved country, the mother of freedom, the asylum of the persecuted, whose sons have gone forth from their island home to teach the British tongue, and hand down the British name to empires now just springing into life; who, at the cost of twenty millions, willed that slavery should be no more. Look around at what she has done, and think not that her strength is spent, or her arm unnerved. If Rookeries be the canker-worms,
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not of England but of Europe, may she, who is the first in arts and arms, be
the first to sweep them from the land they disgrace – may she take the lead
in the holy work, from whom the voice has oft gone forth which awoke
Europe from her slumber.49

I have included the words of Beames at length because between the
hyperbole they reveal much of significance about the political and histori-
cal specificity of the racialization of the poor. How was it, he inquired, that
within a nation of an ancient Anglo-Saxon people whose wise and benign
influence has shaped the modern world a poor population living in
wretched conditions was formed? The question was an urgent one, for this
population presented the nation with a moral obligation and a political
dilemma that had not been resolved. Strong as England was through a
liberal constitution that had survived revolutionary impulses convulsing
the rest of Europe, the poor remained a malignant presence at the very
heart. That presence threatened progress, for without social reform the
poor, mindful of past neglect, would seek violent retribution. As in the
past when the nation gave freedom to the civilized world, was a haven for
the persecuted, bestowed civilization throughout its empire, and in com-
plete disregard for self-interest abolished slavery, England had once again
to meet the challenge and fulfil its historic destiny by sweeping away the
slums.

Here is the discursive context within which racial theories of the poor
came to prominence in nineteenth-century England.50 The articulating
principle was progress, for it was through the complex dialectic between
the hope for a future built upon intellectual, imperial and industrial revo-
lutions and the threat posed by their antinomies that the concept of race
came to express the ‘conundrum of inequality’.51 The optimistic sense of
inevitable progress promoted by eighteenth-century philosophes was re-
cast by a sense of foreboding about the potential of regression and rever-
sion. At this intersection, race embodied and helped construct the natural
superiority of the progressive elites over their regressive class and imperial
subjects.52

This was possible because race provided an historically secure and in-
violable sense of community at a time of rapid change and fragmentation.
In England this took the form of the imagined community of Anglo-
Saxonism which gathered strength in the late eighteenth century, achiev-
ing its triumphant apogee in the mid nineteenth when the racial theorist
Robert Knox could write, ‘With me, race or hereditary descent is every-
thing; it stamps the man’.53 But such communities simultaneously con-
solidated divisions because they defined themselves by exclusion as much
as by inclusion, thereby undermining the universalism of the Enlighten-
ment project. And since exclusion operated against others beyond and
within the territorial boundaries of the imagined community, internal
class divisions came to be seen as racial. Racialization in this sense, therefore, refers to the appropriation and subsequent reproduction of a particular conception of race within hegemonic structures. It can take two co-existent forms. In one, the racialized groups are incorporated within the social body in positions of subordination; in the other, they are excluded to the margins beyond the social body. Both serve to consolidate a racially based order.

Wandering tribes

It seems well known that during a period of prolific writing over 1849–52 Henry Mayhew did more than any other to ‘discover the poor’. The experiences of metropolitan street traders, thieves, prostitutes, beggars and other species of outcast London were recorded, much of the detail being provided from direct oral testimony of people he interviewed. Originally, the material appeared as regular articles in the Morning Chronicle, and later weekly pamphlets, but he is now remembered best for the four-volume compilation London Labour and the London Poor published over 1861–62. Its introductory chapter is replete with a social imagery representing the poor in cultural terms seemingly identical to those used by racial theorists and anthropologists to construct the colonial other. In the oft-quoted preface Mayhew described himself as a ‘traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor ... of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth’; indeed, there are references in the first section on costermongers to the travel accounts of writers such as Andrew Smith in South Africa, Captain Cochrane in Russia, and John Ross and Captain Parry in the polar regions. Mayhew then proceeded to define the object of inquiry by invoking a series of manichean dualisms:

Of the thousand million of human beings that are said to constitute the population of this entire globe, there are – socially, morally, and perhaps even physically considered – but two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the wanderers and the settlers – the nomadic and the civilized tribes.

These curious oppositions reveal the rather inchoate discursive formations about the poor that Mayhew inhabited at this early stage. The term ‘wandering tribes’ was widely used to describe the itinerant population of the countryside, and by ethnologists to describe nomadic peoples; only Mayhew applied it to metropolitan ‘street-folk’, and here ambiguously since many of the life stories he recounted display patterns of settlement not migration. ‘Vagabond’, a term symptomatic of the criminalization of the poor, was contrasted with the politically laden concept of the citizen. But it was the opposition of nomadic and civilized tribes that had the
In a brief section entitled ‘Of wandering tribes in general’ Mayhew claimed that attitude and behaviour distinguish the nomad from the civilized man. The nomad had a ‘repugnance to regular and continuous labour’, a ‘want of providence’, a ‘passion for stupefying herbs’ and ‘intoxicating fermented liquors’, a ‘delight in warfare’, a ‘vague sense of religion’, and so on. This moral and cultural construction, combined with an assertion that nomadic tribes are universal, clearly forged an identity between tribe and the prevalent notion of race; indeed, Mayhew used tribe and race interchangeably. Into this he inserted biology. Thus wandering races have ‘broad, lozenge-shaped faces (owing to the great development of the cheek bones), and pyramidal skulls’, while the most civilized races have ‘oval or elliptical’ skulls. He summed up:

Here, then, we have a series of facts of utmost social importance. [1] There are two distinct races of men, viz.: the wandering and the civilized tribes; [2] to each of these tribes a different form of head is peculiar, the wandering races being remarkable for the development of the bones of the face, as the jaws, cheek-bones, &c., and the civilized for the development of those of the head; [3] to each civilized tribe there is generally a wandering horde attached; [4] such wandering hordes have frequently a different language from the more civilized portion of the community, and that adopted with the intent of concealing their designs and exploits from them.

The sources of such a racial typography were evident from references made to contemporary ethnographical work, most notably that of James Prichard, whose influential *Natural History of Man* had been republished the year before Mayhew began his survey, and from which Mayhew quotes ideas concerning distinctive physical characteristics. From a humanitarian perspective and in ways that anticipated Darwin, Prichard attempted to explain the development of racial types through monogenesis. But many of the subtleties of his arguments were effaced by commentators. Thus Mayhew took the physical variations used by Prichard to demonstrate the essential unity of humankind as inherently racial, and assumed a physiognomic typology with which the lower races could readily be identified and the investigation of the metropolitan nomads could proceed.

Unsurprisingly, Mayhew has been regarded by commentators as an unreconstructed racial theorist, or ignored except as a source of information on the black metropolis. A more reflexive assessment of Mayhew is required. Recent work has begun this, and while much of it has attempted to rethink Mayhew’s location within the discursive domain of the political economy of the poor, it has opened up useful avenues of inquiry into his contribution to an understanding of their racial and cultural identity.
a valuable analysis of Mayhew, Karel Williams has demonstrated that the non-unitary, unstable and unsystematic qualities of the material published in the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Labour and the London Poor* both defined its modernity and rendered impossible any essentialist reading. Mayhew’s approach was that of an inductive empiricist. He described himself as a mere collector of facts on the basis of which he would be able to formulate general laws governing the political economy of the poor. Classification was an essential component of this methodology, and became something of an obsession. Over time he struggled to structure the diversity of occupations into meaningful categories, but because of the absence of consistently applied empiricist techniques and an emphasis on descriptive categories this process became ‘an active disorganizing principle’ quite incapable of identifying causal connections between empirical variables.

The diverse, promiscuous and chaotic empirical material amassed by Mayhew defied logical classification, and forced him occasionally to adopt an alternative methodology by conjuring up formal theory as a ‘deductive deus ex machina’. This was the case when he attempted to formulate a theory of low wages, but more importantly to invoke contemporary ethnological theory. The putative distinctions between wanderers and settlers were made not on the basis of empirical material he collected, but introduced as a means of conferring status to the text and adding ‘interpretative garnish to the facts’. The result was that Mayhew did not attempt a radical vision of the poor, but ‘simply endorsed the conventional wisdom of ethnology and identified the street folk as the wandering tribe in the midst of a civilised nation’.

Here I part company with Williams, for Mayhew’s use of ethnological theory cannot consistently be argued to be both an interpretative garnish and an endorsement of conventional wisdom. And it is simply not true that in *London Labour and the London Poor* Mayhew was complicit in his endorsement because he devalued the testimony of street folk and refused to represent them from their own point of view. Ethnological theory had little direct impact on Mayhew’s material; indeed, for the most part the experiences recorded through personal testimony and the commentaries on them conflicted sharply with its logical suppositions.

Mayhew’s treatment of costermongers provides a most appropriate test not least because it appears at the beginning of Volume I, immediately after the theoretical discussion on ‘wandering tribes in general’; if ethnological theory is to be found, it is here. In a long and detailed section Mayhew described the numbers, earnings, dress, diet, language and homes of the costermongers, and more notably their culture and politics. Unsurprisingly, he introduced street sellers in terms that would have been familiar to racial theorists:
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[It is always in those callings which are the most uncertain, that the greatest amount of improvidence and intemperance are found to exist.... Moreover, when the religious, moral, and intellectual degradation of the great majority of these fifty thousand people is impressed upon us, it becomes positively appalling to contemplate the vast amount of vice, ignorance and want, existing in these days in the very heart of our land. The public have but to read the following plain unvarnished account of the habits, amusements, dealings, education, politics, and religion of the London costermongers in the nineteenth century, and then to say whether they think it safe – even if it be thought fit – to allow men, women and children to continue in such a state.]

And there followed references to their ‘continual warfare with force’ and the ‘treachery and cunning’ found among ‘savage nations’. But this has to be seen against later arguments that stressed their qualities and the nature of the ‘degradation’ they are forced to suffer:

We have now had an inkling of the London costermonger’s notions upon politics and religion. We have seen the brutified state in which he is allowed by society to remain though possessing the same faculties and susceptibilities as ourselves – the same power to perceive and admire the forms of truth, beauty, and goodness, as even the very highest in the state.

He concluded:

My personal experience with this peculiar class [sic] justifies me in saying that they are far less dishonest than they are usually believed to be, and much more honest than their wandering habits, their want of education and ‘principle’ would lead even the most charitable to suppose.

Most tellingly, and with a nice touch of irony, Mayhew quoted directly the words of a ‘general dealer’:

‘You see, sir, the letters in the Morning Chronicle set people a talking, and some altered their way of business. Some were very angry at what was said in the articles on the street sellers, and swore that costers was gentlemen, and that they’d smash the men’s noses that had told you, sir, if they knew who they were.’

At no time was reference made to distinct physical characteristics.

Material on prostitutes, thieves and beggars was brought together in Volume IV of the series. This volume seems an anomaly. Some of the material on prostitution had appeared in the original two-volume edition of 1851, but when the volumes were expanded by the inclusion of new and recycled material on street folk, the publishers decided to place the prostitution material in a separate final volume along with sections on thieves, swindlers and beggars written by Mayhew’s co-workers John Binny and
Andrew Halliday. Perhaps because of this, Volume IV has conventionally been seen as part of a distinct project. In fact, it is difficult to see this as a project at all. Thieves, swindlers and beggars could legitimately be considered as street folk, even if they were numbered among Mayhew’s ‘those that cannot work, and those that will not work’. And although these sections were not written by Mayhew, the approach was his.

The material on prostitution, on the other hand, was quite distinct. Nearly three-quarters of it comprised a long historical survey of prostitution in various lands written by Mayhew and Bracebridge Hemyng. If there is evidence in Mayhew of a retreat from the critical edge of social inquiry to the refuge of racial ideology it is to be found here, for what is reproduced is little more than familiar perspectives gleaned from travel and evangelical writings. Those on India (included among the ‘semi-civilized nations’) are representative. Drawing on the notable works of people such as Buchanan, Hamilton, Grant, Ward, Mill, Heber and Dubois, the section on India surveyed in general terms the state of gender relations prior to the 1857 revolt. National characteristics, the authors claim, have much to do with ‘climate and position’ but more with ‘government’. Under East India Company rule, it follows, we have witnessed a ‘change in the manners and institutions of the people perfectly wonderful to contemplate’. The abominations of child marriage, sati, and female infanticide perpetrated by the caste system have been mitigated through the efforts of the Company. The general state of women, however, has not improved, and as long as Hindus continue to revere the teachings of Manu nor is it likely to do so. The ‘timid effeminate Bengalee appears of a sensual character, and regards his wife as little more than the instrument of his pleasure’. Women are therefore denied the advantages of education, and forbidden to mix with others. Among the ‘more wild and barbarous tribes, as well as the more ignorant classes … men frequently beat their wives’.

Certain disjunctions exist, therefore, between the early and later Mayhew, and between commentary and oral testimony. Because of the peculiar relationship he had with the poor – much closer and more prolonged than other contemporary investigators – Mayhew came to recognize that the classificatory frameworks were inadequate if not irrelevant, and that ethnological theory was inappropriate. The sheer variety and profusion of experience he recorded increasingly challenged the crude cultural, racial and physiognomic topologies, until they collapsed under the weight. What Gagnier says of the socio-economic classification also applies to the racial:

The road to his final, surprising analysis is one of distinctions multiplied indefinitely, until all that remains is not the abstract categories of political economists but the unique ‘character’ singularly embedded in its material.
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world, a world that Mayhew values above all other cultural configurations, classifications, and statistics. He differed from novelists of his class and time in never taking the individual ‘character’ as representative of the poor in general, but rather in multiplying their differences between one another ad infinitum.79

Questions on details of the socio-economic classifications employed by Mayhew – indeed on the very constituency of the poor he explored80 – require further attention, but what is clear is that by celebrating the productivity of the poor, the ‘fecund materiality of the city’,81 he subverted contemporary perspectives. Examples abound of accounts that demonstrated the resourcefulness, physical presence, interdependence, cooperation, moral integrity and intelligence of the poor,82 and simultaneously challenged pervasive racialized typologies of the same population as ignorant, isolated and primitive. Not until he considered ‘less civilized’ societies using evidence from evangelical and travel accounts did he lapse into more familiar racial categorizations [see pp. 153–5].

Mayhew’s project was polymorphic.83 Working in the troubled milieu following the 1848 revolution, the defeat of chartism, and a devastating outbreak of cholera, Mayhew – himself located contradictorily within the social formation – stood at an intersection between the radical potential of allowing the poor a voice and the regressive tendencies of racialized ethnographic theories. He went no further in realizing that potential; a variety of literary and journalistic endeavours of little note followed until his death in 1887 amidst poverty and obscurity.

His legacy is more difficult to assess. In the only study to date which attempts to present Mayhew’s life and work, written at a time of renewed interest, Humpherys claims that Mayhew’s innovatory contributions to social knowledge exerted no influence on his contemporaries.84 Mayhew’s investigative techniques were rapidly rendered obsolete by advances in the second half of the century. He may have been recognized and respected for the series published in the Morning Chronicle, but later work was largely ignored. Abrupt changes in the project and the considerable delay in publishing the collected work meant that the majority remained inaccessible to a reading public. By the time London Labour and the London Poor appeared, Mayhew’s revelations were out of date. ‘For this reason the four volume publication had practically no influence on either the sociology or the literature of the late Victorian period’,85 and by the 1860s he was at best remembered vaguely as the ‘metropolitan correspondent’ who revealed the plight of street sellers.

This is a harsh judgement, but justifiable if Mayhew’s influence is thought as direct. His pioneering work on the London poor inspired no other sociological inquiries into metropolitan life. The next major project
on poverty, Charles Booth’s *London Life and London Labour*, was undertaken forty years later and bore little of the imprint of Mayhew. On the other hand, Mayhew’s influence on literary genres was undeniable. The weekly editions of *London Labour and the London Poor* had sales of 13,000, the *Morning Chronicle* probably a third of that. And they were widely reviewed in periodicals and the press. These responses provide insight into the real legacy. Reviewers for the most part commented on the ‘strange’, ‘wonderful’, ‘piteous’ and ‘terrible’ revelations of the unknown land, effectively appropriating Mayhew by inserting him within the traditions of travel writing and gothic fiction that were so deeply implicated in the literary imagination of the imperial formation. Mayhew can be detected in Dickens, Thackeray and Kingsley, but his influence was not as the social investigator but as the source of bizarre and exotic characters. More important was the momentum given to the nascent tradition of semi-factual investigation into the metropolitan poor.

**Mayhew’s legacy**

A variety of texts from the 1850s and 1860s reveal affinities with Mayhew. In 1853, John Garwood, secretary to the London City Mission, published *The Million Peopled City*. Claiming the study to be a ‘plain tale. The facts themselves are its only eloquence’, Garwood included a detailed summary of an 1851 inquiry conducted by the mission into the London Irish, and long extracts from a lecture given in 1852 by the Rev. Samuel Garratt:

> A very little acquaintance with [the Irish] is sufficient to discover, in spite of all their social degradation, a peculiarity of character which would blend most usefully with their Saxon neighbours. The English labourer, with all his manliness and honesty, is often wanting in intellectual acuteness and in imaginative glow. In both these characteristics the Irish excel.... The worst parts in the character of the Irish of London are that they are idle and dirty, that they are without that honourable independence of mind which is so valuable a feature of the English character.

Such sentiments may have displayed a degree of Christian sympathy with the urban poor, but of greater significance was the racialization of specific groups through identification of essential characteristics, and the fluidity of the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion operating between the groups. Here, faced with an Irish other, the English poor were readily incorporated into the Saxon race; but at times of profound anxiety for the imperial state other colonial subjects were introduced into the racial equation.

1857 was one such moment. Consider writings on the metropolitan poor around the time when the Indian revolt burst upon the psychic landscape of the English middle classes. A North American visitor, D.W.
Bartlett, some four years before 1857 described the prevalent disregard for India in a metropolis grown rich on the proceeds of wholesale plunder:

A commercial company, called the East India Company, holds in trust for the crown this great India Empire, and has done so for many years. The iniquities which have been perpetrated upon the natives have often been exposed, but the English have never manifest national shame or repentance.... This influx of capital keeps the aristocratic classes rolling in splendour, and also renders them ... independent of the poverty-stricken condition of the English people. A panic at home does not touch them, for they lean upon India, and they can laugh when national calamity cometh.... [V]ery little is said in England about this great system of fraud and oppression save by a few men like George Thompson and John Bright. Exeter Hall resounds with eloquence directed against negro slavery – but India is passed over in silence.90

The revolt forced India onto the political agenda, not least by articulating – in the sense of both linking and expressing – more strikingly than heretofore anxieties around the metropolitan and colonial poor. Frederick Meyrick, a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, published in 1858 a series of sermons under the rubric of a compelling phrase from Psalm 82, ‘Deliver the outcast and poor; save them from the hand of the ungodly’. He described vividly scenes at the London dock gates that were to become a powerful metaphor for the animalistic struggles of the metropolitan poor.91 Such scenes, Meyrick claimed, promoted and were symptomatic of the ‘two chief vices to which the Anglo-Saxon race is above other races prone’, namely, ‘drunkenness and mammonism – the intemperance which wallows senseless in the kennel, and the hard-heartedness which grinds the faces of the poor for the sake of adding gain to gain’.92 We are left in no doubt, however, that despite these unfortunate propensities, the poor were included within this evangelical vision of the English race:

My brethren, the persons ... I have cursorily described, are Englishmen – dwellers in this city – close to us – round about us.... As members of the human family, as countrymen, as men who ought to be, if they are not, Christians, they are our brethren; and it is a duty incumbent upon you to have regard for their spiritual and temporal welfare.93

In India, on the other hand, contemporary events had testified to the consequences of allowing a race outside the Anglo-Saxon to remain free from the healthy restraints of Christianity:

God gave us the vast empire of India. Millions of souls He committed into the hand of England. They were sunk in debasing superstitions and immoralities, but we would not give them a better religion, or interfere with their wickedness.... And so we let them wallow on in their corruption and congratulate ourselves on our tolerance and freedom from bigotry. And then,
when we least expected it, the evil beast within them, which we had not chained by the wholesome restraints of Christian precept and example, rose up, and the demon passions which we had taken no pains to eradicate or repress awoke, and they turned the skill and craft and cleverness, which we had willingly fostered and cultivated, against ourselves, and deeds were done in the name of heaven, such as the devil and his worshippers alone can do.\textsuperscript{94}

Later, as the reverberations from the revolt receded, Joseph Mullens, Foreign Secretary of the London Missionary Society, compared his extensive experiences of London and Calcutta. India, he claimed, had been the noblest site of missionary enterprise and Christian government. From early beginnings, the numbers of missionaries had increased rapidly, and wise and just government had provided the stability necessary for material and social prosperity. In Calcutta, however, as in London, there remained sites of degeneration almost beyond redemption:

There is a real heathenism, physically and socially degrading in the extreme; a heathenism widespread, involving myriads in its blackness, crushing all hope and purity and peace out of their life now, and leaving them hopeless in relation to a future world.... There are slums in London, known only to city missionaries and the men who work with them, in which violence and vice abound to a degree which cannot be told. But the slums of heathenism go a long way lower. They reach the very horrors of immorality.\textsuperscript{95}

Parallels clearly existed in evangelical thought between perceptions of the conditions suffered by the metropolitan poor and colonial subjects, and of the political consequences threatened by their continued neglect. Where differences existed they were ascribed to the nature of the response of the constituencies to the Christian word. However, the fact that the metropolitan poor could be included as ‘our brethren’ even though not Christians, suggested that another mechanism of exclusion operated. Race was the most significant category of separation; as Mullens proceeded logically to argue, the most formidable opponent to Christianity in India was a caste system which could not be overthrown except through that ‘large-hearted enlightenment which gives broad views of ... the connexion between man and man, race and race’.\textsuperscript{96}

It was in the work of journalists, however, that the appropriation of Mayhew was most evident and a more strident racial coding occurred. Watts Phillips, an acquaintance of Mayhew, who had been in Paris at the time of the 1848 revolution, published in 1855 a popular book entitled, with ethnographic reference, \textit{The Wild Tribes of London}.\textsuperscript{97} Based on visits made to districts ‘inhabited by those strange and neglected races’, the sketches conveyed the full repertoire of new racial identities. Near Holborn, for example, he recalled courts which
swarm with dirty unwashed men, who bear, Cain-like, on every brow a brand that warns you to avoid them – with rude, coarse women, whose wild language, fierce eyes, and strange lascivious gestures strike terror to the spectator’s heart... Children... literally swarm about the road, half-naked, shaggy-headed little savages, who flock about you, and, with canting phrase and piteous whine, solicit charity for their dying father, – that broad shouldered, burly-looking Milesian, who has just reeled from the tavern-door.98

John Hollingshead, a staff member of Dickens’s *Household Words* and the *Cornhill Magazine*, wrote in identical terms about a population whose history was marked by the ‘five great divisions’ of ‘poverty, ignorance, dirt, immorality and crime’99:

Fryingpan Alley... is worse than anything in Whitechapel or Bethnal Green. The rooms are dustbins – everything but dwelling places. The women are masculine in appearance; they stand with coarse, folded arms and knotted hair, and are ready to fight for their castle of filth.... I should call Whitechapel by its more appropriate name of Blackchapel, and play with the East of London under the title St. Giles-in-the-Dirt.... Within a few yards of this refuge is New Court, a nest of thieves, filled with thick-lipped, broad-featured, rough-haired women, and hulking, leering men, who stand in knots, tossing for pennies, or lean against the walls at the entrances of the low courts ... The faces that peer out of the narrow windows are yellow and repulsive; some are the faces of Jews, some of Irishwomen, and some of sickly-looking infants.100

By 1861 these diverse racialized discourses on the metropolitan poor were being articulated into a complex whole. Within the metropolis an internal orient was perceived, prefiguring inevitable moral and physical decline not only in the metropolis itself but also in the empire:

Every year the manufactures and trade of the country will attract a greater proportion of the population into the larger towns. An actuary would predict the decade in which the deterioration and waste of the towns shall cease to be adequately sustained by healthy immigration from the country. From that moment the decadence of the British Empire will begin.101

The generation of social explorers in the immediate post-Mayhew period, however, is best exemplified by James Greenwood, whose career as a journalist and novelist spanned over forty years, in the course of which he published thirty-nine books and contributed numerous articles to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Daily Telegraph*.102 Greenwood began writing in the 1860s, largely in response to the devastating consequences of the severe social and economic dislocation in the metropolis attendant on financial collapse and a cholera epidemic. His investigations were based on close personal observation of the poor, made possible by the then unusual step of disguising himself as one of their number.
Writing under the pseudonyms ‘The amateur casual’, ‘One of a crowd’ and ‘A London rambler’, he first came to public attention in 1866 with a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* describing the horrors of a night in the casual ward of a workhouse, when he was forced to sleep on a blood-soaked mattress and converse with the other inmates. There followed a steady stream of books, the titles to which suggest the impressionistic, semi-factual and racialized approach to the metropolitan poor Greenwood adopted: *Legends of Savage Life* (1866), *Seven Curses of London* (1869), *In Strange Company* (1873), *Wilds of London* (1874), *Low Life Deeps* (1875) and *The Wild Man at Home; or, Pictures of Life in Savage Lands* (1879). The description of women in the vicinities of the Costers Mission – ‘A mission among city savages’ – is representative of his portrayal of the metropolitan poor:

The life that stirs in these black crooked lanes, not wider than the length of a walking stick, scarcely seems human. Creatures that you know to be female by the length and raggedness of hair that makes their heads hideous, and by their high-pitched voices, with bare red arms, and their bodies bundled in a complication of dirty rags, loll out of the patched and plastered holes in the wall that serve as windows, and exchange with their opposite neighbours compliments or blasphemous abuse.

But Greenwood inhabited a broadly humanitarian perspective, and saw such cultural depravity not as an inherent immorality of the poor, but as a demoralization fostered by middle-class ‘reform’. Of the ‘seven curses of London’, the worst was elision of boundaries between the deserving and undeserving poor by the indiscriminate distribution of charity. Even habitual violence was blamed on neglect:

Did such accounts appear in the newspaper but rarely it might be assumed that the wanton brutality was done by some muscular blackguard who had drunk himself to the same condition of mind as the savage who, armed with a club and a hatchet, ‘runs amuck’ through his village, maiming and killing everyone he meets. But when such cases occur, sometimes three or four times a week, and the attendant circumstances are very much the same, one cannot help thinking that, at least in some instances, more responsible persons that men mad with drink are the evil doers.

The body of semi-factual literature on the early nineteenth-century metropolitan poor constitutes a complex picture of contrast, contradiction and plurality but one in which distinct shifts are evident. In the course of the nineteenth century, and in the context of the imperial formation, the poor were constructed as a subordinate race. Around 1840 a preoccupation with the curious, bizarre and criminal propensities of the underworld was displaced by perspectives which although diverse were embedded in
theorizations of the innate superiority of the bourgeois Anglo-Saxon subject over colonial and poor others.

Racial theories were rarely used by urban travellers in a consistent and rigorous way, not least because the theories themselves were riven by internal contradictions. Mayhew, for example, is generally regarded as seminal in the early construction of the poor as racially distinct, but the interpretative premises of the preface were effectively subverted by the logic of the empirical material that followed. Mayhew’s legacy was to be found in a tradition of urban travel which appropriated selectively the ground he had prepared as evangelical and journalistic accounts revealed increasing evidence of racial coding. In this race was not an anterior category augmenting the inventory of elite concerns over order, citizenship and the empire, but from the outset was integral to ways in which these problems were defined and perceived, and to which solutions were sought.

In Greenwood we see the culmination of the tradition of urban exploration founded by Mayhew. Thereafter, as fears of social disorder and imperial decline took hold, the symbolic repertoires of dirt and degeneration imparted a sinister, intense and menacing turn to racialization of the poor. Faced with seemingly diverse, uncontrollable and unknowable low others, imperial theorists found in such repertoires a versatile means of transcoding physical difference into moral and cultural difference. Toward the end of the century when modernist impulses gained strength, the poor were displaced in the bourgeois imagination. The crowd and the abyss came to dominate the agenda of attempts to appropriate the metropolitan poor at a time of fragmentation and alienation. In this, however, race continued to act as a critical referent.

Notes
13 Jon Bee [John Badcock], *A Living Picture of London, for 1828, and Stranger’s Guide*, [125]
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London, Clarke, 1828, p. 120.


17 Bee, A Living Picture of London, p. v.


20 Peter J. Keating, The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, pp. 17–18. Significantly, however, Dickens was also a journalist, and it was in this role that he brought his considerable powers of observation to reveal the plight of the metropolitan poor. He started writing as a journalist, and although his imagination and supreme powers of observation were to find more fertile expression in the novel, they continued to be displayed in the numerous articles he continued to write on aspects of metropolitan low life. The best of these appeared in Household Words and All The Year Round, both of which were edited by Dickens. Among them were ‘A walk in the workhouse’, ‘A December vision’, and ‘On duty with Inspector Field’, which exposed the inhumanities of a system that condemned the poor (see Michael Slater [ed.], The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism, 3 vols, London, Dent, 1994–98, and my edited collection, The Metropolitan Poor. Semi-Factual Accounts, 1795–1910, 6 vols, London, Pickering and Chatto, 1999, Vol. I).


23 Ibid., p. 11. The passing reference to Benares and Calcutta masks Noel’s deep and abiding interest in India. In the aftermath of emancipation and the declaration of independence by the Jamaican Baptist Union, the BMS turned with renewed attention to India. At its 1850 annual meeting he declared that although ‘Hindoos were the slaves of the most complicated superstition the world has ever seen’, and ‘caste was a diabolical chain, holding them in servitude, inertness of mind, and foul superstition’, they could not resist the superior intellect, morals and civilization of the British (cited in Catherine Hall, Civilising Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867, London, Polity, 2002, pp. 370–1).

24 Lewis, Lighten their Darkness, p. 50. Noel’s findings predated the 1851 Religious Census by fifteen years. No one familiar with Noel could have been surprised by the revelations on church abstinence contained therein.

25 Ibid., Appendix B, p. 279.

26 These visits were augmented by agents of the Scripture Readers’ Association and the Ranyard Bible Mission, both of which were increasingly active during the 1850s. In 1860 it has been estimated that a total of 628 full-time agents were operating (ibid.).


29 Ibid., p. 79.

30 Thomas Chalmers, Evidence before the Select Committee on Mendicity and Vagrancy in the Metropolis, 1815; Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns, Glasgow, Chalmers and Collins, 1821.


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33 Ibid., p. 122.
36 Smeeton, Doings in London, p. iii.
37 Ibid., p. 3.
38 Bee, A Living Picture of London, p. vi.
39 Ibid., p. 264.
40 Noel, The State of the Metropolis, p. 11.
41 Ibid., pp. 12–16, 24.
44 In writing this I have been mindful of Thomas’s exhortation to avoid the ‘Scylla of mindlessly particular conventional colonial history, which fails to move beyond the perceptions of whichever administrators or missionaries are being documented’ and the ‘Charybdis of colonial discourse theory which totalizes a hegemonic global ideology, neither much tainted by its conditions of production nor transformed by the pragmatics of colonial encounters and struggles’ [Nicholas Thomas, Colonialism’s Culture. Anthropology, Travel and Government, London, Polity Press, 1994, p. 60].
46 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
47 Ibid., p. 45.
48 Ibid., pp. 210–11.
49 Ibid., p. 218.
51 Malik, The Meaning of Race, p. 72.
52 Paul Gilroy has argued persuasively for the necessity of rethinking modernity in the light of an experience of slavery actively legitimated by racial theory [The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness, London, Verso, 1993]. The same argument obtains for the experience of imperial conquest.
54 Malik, The Meaning of Race, p. 81.
59 Ibid., p. 2.
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63 Equally significantly, Mayhew displayed a cavalier use of the term race, and one inconsistent with that of Prichard. He claimed at the outset, for example, that humans are divided into two races, but then proceeded to argue that wanderers in England are part of the same community as ‘the more industrious’, later referring to them occasionally as a ‘class’, ‘body’, ‘horde’ or ‘order’. Such lack of conceptual rigour was in part the product of Mayhew’s casual use of ethnological theory, but is more appropriately seen as symptomatic of the estranged relationship between evidence and theory in his own writings.

64 See, for example, Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, Chapter 14 [although she is aware of some of the difficulties], and Henrika Kuklick, The Savage Within. The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 100.

65 Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians, pp. 41–3.


67 Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty.

68 Ibid., p. 241.

69 Ibid., p. 243.

70 Ibid., p. 261.

71 Ibid., p. 6.

72 Ibid., p. 16.

73 Ibid., p. 25.

74 Ibid., p. 31.

75 Ibid., p. 33. This quotation suggests that Mayhew’s works were known to the costers. Evidence exists also from a meeting of ticket-of-leave men organized by Mayhew at Farringdon Hall in January 1857. One of an audience estimated at ninety stated that Mr Mayhew was ‘making capital out of them all ... this ingenious gentleman merely gets them together in order to “suck their brains” and make up pretty stories for publication’. The Times’ leader which reported the meeting suggested that it should have been held at Drury Lane [29 January 1857].

76 Williams deals with some of the arguments, but concludes that the fourth volume reinstated one of Mayhew’s projects by providing an excuse for a piece of ‘dirty journalism’ – another example of Victorian soft porn [Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, pp. 272–4].


78 Ibid., p. 117.

79 Gagnier, Subjectivities, p. 84.

80 Mayhew’s subjects were what he called the street folk – the relatively small ‘wandering tribe’ of musicians, beggars, sweepers, and so on – rather than the labouring poor or the pauper population as a whole.

81 The phrase is Gagnier’s, Subjectivities, p. 86.

82 Exactly the same arguments apply to the visual imagery which was such an important part of Mayhew’s project. Illustrations of the poor defy neat racial classification, and their sheer diversity defies any sense of an internal coherence necessary for construction of an other (Barringer, ‘Images of otherness’).
83 See Taithe, The Essential Mayhew – a curious title given the general thrust of the arguments, even though he claims that in the ‘Answers to correspondents’ printed on the covers to weekly instalments of London Labour and the London Poor over 1851–52 is to be found the key to Mayhew’s project.

84 Humpherys, Travels into the Poor Man’s Country, pp. 163–94.
85 Ibid., pp. 165–6.
88 John Garwood, The Million Peopled City, or One Half of the People of London Made Known to the Other Half, London, Wertheim and Macintosh, 1853.
89 Ibid., pp. 256, 263.
91 Frederick Meyrick, The Outcast and the Poor of London, or, Our Present Duties Toward the Poor: a Course of Sermons, London, Rivingtons, 1858, p. 35.
92 Ibid., p. 45.
93 Ibid., p. 17.
94 Ibid., p. 241.
96 Ibid., p. 135.
98 Ibid., pp. 10, 12.
99 John Hollingshead, Ragged in London in 1861, London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1861, p. 8. The book comprised a collection of articles previously published in the Morning Post under the title ‘London horrors’. Interestingly, the pathology anticipated the five giants in post-war Britain that the Beveridge Report attempted to tackle, although Beveridge was a little more reticent about the morality.
100 Ibid., pp. 30, 39, 44.
103 The articles were subsequently reprinted in full by The Times and as a book, A Night in the Workhouse [1866]. They created a sensation. The editor of the Morning Post, Sir William Hardman, declared that he would rather ‘brave a Crimean campaign or an Indian Mutiny than undertake such a deed of daring’, and thought Greenwood was entitled to the Victoria Cross. The Spectator, on the other hand, remarked that ‘the “Amateur casual” had spent only one night under conditions to which hundreds of his countrymen were condemned any day of their lives’. Stead, who himself was later to create the odd journalistic sensation or two in the pages of the Pall Mall Gazette, stated that from ‘the storm of indignation over ‘that one night in a casual ward may be traced the beginning of the reform of our Poor Law’ (Robertson Scott, The Story of the Pall Mall Gazette, pp. 168–9).