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HENRY MAYHEW

London Labour and the London Poor

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Unflinching reports of London's poor from a prolific and influential English writer

London Labour and the London Poor originated in a series of articles, later published in four volumes, written for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849 and 1850 when journalist Henry Mayhew was at the height of his career. Mayhew aimed simply to report the realities of the poor from a compassionate and practical outlook. This penetrating selection shows how well he succeeded: the underprivileged of London become extraordinarily and often shockingly alive.

London Labour and the London Poor Details

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From Reader Review *London Labour and the London Poor* for online ebook

Jason Mills says

London Labour and the London Poor began life in a newspaper around 1850 and went through several editions, culminating in four volumes. Mayhew sought to survey at first-hand the lives of the impoverished, and analyse the causes of their poverty. Modern popular editions like this one are selections from the larger work. The editors in this case have sought not merely to provide a 'colourful' selection of Mayhew's interviews with the poor, but to represent the breadth of his writings and concerns. Thus, this edition is rearranged and chaptered thematically, whilst the knowledgeable introduction explores Mayhew's life and the context of and reactions to his work.

Nonetheless, the voices of the poor bubble to the surface incessantly throughout the book, their sober testimonials often shocking. There is a good deal on the subculture of costermongers, but we also hear from the Jews, the Irish, street entertainers, labourers, thieves, cabinet-makers, scavengers, "pure-finders", etc. The longest chapter here, and perhaps the most trenchantly polemical, presents Mayhew's exhaustive account of the methods by which unscrupulous employers exploit the workers, who, desperate to earn a crust, are forced to collude in cruelly inventive systems that can only depress their own wages. (One reads of the shamelessly profiteering system for hiring ballast-heavers with astonishment that such practices could be legal.) There are also chapters on criminality, domestic life, culture, etc.

Mayhew's determined efforts to support his case with statistics suffer from a paucity of good data and unsophisticated methodology at the time; but with both this and his copious direct experience he still succeeds in undermining the glib arguments of contemporary economists that the poor had essentially made their own beds, and that their capitalist employers should not be expected to help. Mayhew is against charity and for the working man (indeed, he divides the poor into "deserving" and "undeserving" ...), but insists that wages must not be artificially depressed by exploitation. (In the closing section of this edition he draws economists' attention to the unmentioned 600 million "steam men" introduced into the labour market by industrialisation.)

Mayhew lets the poor speak for themselves - in itself a great service to social history - and earnestly draws his arguments out of his discoveries. His analytical writing is clear and cogent, while his reportage, as for instance in describing the street markets, is often vibrant and vivid, and would not disgrace the pages of Dickens.

This 600-page edition's appendices are a bibliography of Mayhew's works, the full table of contents of the larger work, and an expansive list of his sources and authorities - though oddly, no index. There are also 16 illustrations and 4 maps. Though I'm not able to compare other editions, this one seems to me a satisfying, informative, diverse and persuasive selection from one of the classics of social history.

Toby says

A quite extraordinary book - there's just so much (too much, for me) detail about wages, prices, diets, street games...it's full to bursting with information. And so many glaring similarities with today, too.

Michael Rickard says

A fascinating look at London's working poor and unemployed. A comprehensive look at the many vocations of people working the streets of London, ranging from baked potato vendors to prostitutes. An excellent companion who enjoys Victorian era fiction and wants a look at life for part of London's population.

Nicole says

took me a while to get through this one. (i only get to read before bed.) one of those books that you can read 30 pages one night and be enthralled and the next night only 3 because its just tedious. a lot of info is repeated through different chapters and could probably be edited down to half its size. but it was interesting to read from the point of view of an interviewer rather than someone infiltrating the culture. i learnt alot about the working poor and the various ways they try to make a life. i only gave it a 3 due to the repetitiveness, had it been edited differently it would have been a 4 star

Lucinda Elliot says

A necessary read, often grim - in fact , heartbreaking in places - and I had no sentimentalized view of the London of the Victorian age. Wonderfully informative.

Hannah says

At times a bit of a slog, overall a really fascinating glimpse into life in Victorian London.

Tieu uyen says

??c ?? bi?t Svetlana b? ?nh h??ng t? ?âu.

Vintagebooklvr says

There's a lot of valuable information but not something that you read for the fun of it. This is were the rating system of I like it, etc. is difficult to use. A book may be very well written and/or full of information and a seminal of it's field but that doesn't mean you actually like it.

Mary says

Occasionally a bit laborious (no pun intended) to read, but many of the anecdotes - people who train dancing pigs, the reminiscences of burglars, those who wade thru sewers to find valuables - are fascinating. The fourth volume is largely written by others than Mayhew, and is a bit of a different book. This section is more concerned with judging those profiled rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.

Steve Browne says

Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* reminds me of Stud Turkel's *Working*. Also, so many gross jobs and sad stories. It led me to much reflection and sadness for the streetsellers and ragpickers we met in our 60 days in India. Interesting also to see that the drunk bricklayer's harangue to Esther and that missionary in *Bleak House* could have been lifted right from Mayhew. Unfun fact I learned: Londoners had 300,000 pet cats and 150,000 pet dogs. Over the course of the year, they fed them on the boiled flesh of 38,000 horses which they bought off the "cat meat man." The horses sold to the slaughterhouse were worn out or too independent to pull a vehicle or sometimes bred for it.

Edwin John Moorhouse Marr says

Absolutely fascinating book, providing an insight into the lives and struggles of the 19th century poor. At times it is hilariously funny, and at other times, heartbreakingly sad, especially with the discussion of the mudlarks and sewer workers, in addition to the beggars, most of whom Mayhew understands as frauds. It is clear that Mayhew is coming from a particular angle, and therefore emphasises the sympathy of the people he describes, and at times I feel we are hearing Mayhew's speech, more than the street workers, but nevertheless, it is a rare and fascinating insight into the lower strata of Victorian society, and I love how Mayhew presents these characters as being uncomfortably similar to their higher status counterparts.

Martin Jones says

London Labour and the London Poor is Henry Mayhew's classic investigation into the lives of nineteenth century street traders, who made their living making, finding and selling things on the streets of London.

My favourite parts of the book were portraits of individuals based on interviews. All of Mayhew's subjects speak in their own voices. The eight year old cress seller, the clothing salesman describing his dodges, the penniless old woman nursing her dying husband, and the toshers finding lost items in London's sewers - all are particularly memorable. The life of a mudlark, tearing bare feet open on hidden glass or nails hidden in the Thames mud, is truly haunting. Mayhew has a vivid style of writing which brings these people and their world alive. We visit late night street markets, vibrant with light and energy. There is a real drama in the various struggles to run businesses. Parts of the book made me think of a nineteenth century version of *The Apprentice*, though the consequences of getting fired were much more severe.

Other sections detail facts and figures of, for example, how much coal dust was collected by London's dustmen each day. While these sections have the air of a Home Office report, they remain interesting

The book is less good when Mayhew comes between his readers and the people he writes about. Mayhew is good-hearted, but his interjections can betray a moralising religious tone, which I would say has not aged well. This isn't as interesting as the remarkable view he offers into largely ignored experience. Mayhew seems to find it difficult to accept that some of the people he encounters actually enjoy their lives, difficult, godless and rough though they seem to be to an educated, religiously conservative Victorian. As with most writing, it is best to show rather than tell. Mayhew does best when he shows, allowing us to draw our own conclusions. He is less good when he tells.

Janina Woods says

Informative, passionate, amazing. The amount of detail is astounding. Every interview reads like a short novel. Very much recommended!

Will Ransohoff says

This was interesting. The work doesn't have much of a central thesis, it just set out to holistically describe how a huge and diverse group of people lived. Mayhew decided to meticulously chronicle the professions and activities of people living in penury in 1840s London, and that's exactly what he did. But calling his work 'meticulous' just doesn't do it justice.

I've always thought of cities as these massive, churning processes that are completely beyond comprehension, but Mayhew wasn't having any of that. You think of an orphan in Victorian London selling dolls in the streets, and it's easy to just think of them as part of the fabric of the city, one fish in an endless sea; there are tons of orphans selling dolls in the streets, and that's just one thread. You probably don't count them, work out how much money they spend and make, how much it contributes to the city's economy, how much capital you need to start in the business of selling dolls in the streets, detail where they eat and sleep, and lay out a distribution of which areas of the city are the best for street doll selling. And you probably wouldn't go on to find the two people in the entire city who make the eyes for those dolls, what colors they make, what kinds are most popular in London, the differences that set quality doll eyes apart, or why they don't export many doll eyes to the Americas (the climate isn't good for setting the wax they make the dolls out of, so they mostly import whole dolls). But Mayhew pulls at those threads until he unravels the whole tapestry. And then he unravels those threads. And then he finds the weavers who produced them and asks about how they shear their sheep and how much their looms cost. His relentless devotion to cataloging the small area of anthropology he's set aside for himself borders on psychotic. It's astonishing. This book also had the only account of a 19th century ride along that I've ever seen. He wanted to learn more about how thieves lived.

Still, this was written in the mid-1800s. It makes a point of disabusing the notion that the unfortunate were somehow deficient compared to the aristocracy, and that's good; it was definitely not widely accepted at the time. But sometimes it's uncomfortably anachronistic to the point of being outright racist or startlingly sexist. Still, as a chronicle of the struggles that the unprivileged went through around the dawn of industrialization, or even just a more detailed backdrop for your favorite Dickens novel, it's worth reading.

Austen to Zafón says

I read this years ago as an antidote to all the English literature I was reading that I loved, but that primarily concerned the upper class: Austen, Wodehouse, Bronte, Saki, Trollope, Sayers, Christie, and so on. I wanted to know more about the rest of London (and English) society. Well-known journalist Henry Mayhew first published his research into "The Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Cannot Work, and Will Not Work" in the newspaper, and then expanded his work into four volumes. This selection from those volumes fit the bill for me. Largely vivid, first-person accounts from London's underprivileged, combined with fascinating statistics and Mayhew's practical and compassionate views. Far more than a dry historical record. One thing that I found interesting is the number of things for sale on the street: everything from children's gilt watches to groundsel & chickweed to needles to dog collars to hot eel soup & hot elderflower wine. There wasn't much you couldn't buy from a street vendor. And imagine the amazing clamor of all the voices crying out their wares!
