

London Low Life: Street Culture, Social Reform and the Victorian Underworld

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Metropolitan underworlds, where the illicit and illegal rub up against the grime and extreme poverty of those at the bottom of society, have always fascinated contemporaries and later audiences. This is particularly true of the Victorian underworld in London. While unprecedented population and geographical growth from the turn of the 19th century combined with transformative building programmes and the effects of industrialisation entrenched the urban slums, technological changes in the leisure industry breathed new life into entertainments which either appealed to, or projected images of, 'low life'. 21st-century tourist attractions continue to use this image of the seedy and dangerous underbelly to draw in visitors – at opposite ends of the spectrum, the London Dungeon takes paying pleasure seekers through the dark streets of Whitechapel in the footsteps of Jack the Ripper and, in its 'People's City' gallery, the London Museum deliberately juxtaposes Charles Booth's poverty maps of London against scenes of West End glamour. These representations are in part so attractive because they feed into a popular narrative about the Victorian period: while they paint an alternative picture of the Victorians (who are so often portrayed as rather stuffy and restrained), their classification as part of an 'underworld' ensures that they support rather than challenge the dominance of respectable society in the nineteenth century. As the story goes, a fairly clear line marked the respectable from low life (which any crossover or transgressions only seemed to reinforce), and, as the century progressed, the latter was increasingly subjected to control and reform.

On the one hand, the producers of the resource under review, [London Low Life: Street Culture, Social Reform and the Victorian Underworld](#) [2] (2010), have used this popular interest and grand narrative to market their product, which, in fact, has a much broader coverage than its title would suggest. However, on the other hand, the primary sources digitised as part of this resource have the potential to encourage some overdue rethinking of the way in which we conceptualise the Victorians, especially the city dwellers, offering alternative avenues for research and teaching. *London Low Life* draws upon the resources of the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana (Bloomington), presenting digitised material from several important collections relating to life in the metropolis, including: Michael Sadleir's Ephemera, Chapbooks, the Virginia Warren Collection of Old Street Cries, Rare Books, Periodicals, Tallis's Street Views, London Maps and George Gissing's scrapbook from the Pforzheimer Collection. Although some material dates from the 18th or 20th century (and this has been included for good reason, to preserve the integrity of the collections), the overwhelming bulk is from the 19th century and predominantly from the Victorian period.

These items are digitised to the extremely high standard we have come to expect of Adam Matthew Digital. Each pamphlet, book, map, periodical, chapbook and poster (to name but a few of the types of documents) is reproduced at high resolution in full colour, can be enlarged to reveal intricate detail and texture, and, if a

printed text, is accompanied by a transcript. Users of the resource are encouraged to jump straight to document viewing on accessing the site. The rolling widget on the front page featuring themes under which the documents are collated is irresistible. On clicking, as I quickly did when seeing the captivating title, 'Disreputable London', users are presented with a list of items that have been digitised. Similarly, an extremely tempting quick search box appears in the main header, which similarly presents users with a list of hits for their keywords (again, I also succumbed to this, typing in my favourite search term, 'Punch and Judy', which returned 23 items, most of which I had never seen before).

My experience of working on other digital resources and of teaching students how to use them suggests that undergraduates especially find lists of source material either off-putting or very difficult to interpret, sometimes seizing on the inconsequential rather than viewing the resource as a whole. This is no criticism of *London Low Life*: the editors have followed current trends in web design, based on usage research, which aim to get users to relevant information with as few clicks of the mouse as possible. But what works for information heavy websites does not necessarily function so well in humanities resources which are meant to encourage individuals to interpret evidence they are presented with from different angles. Contextualisation is fundamental in this process; and clicking more can aid in the critical appraisal of the documents. In other words, this is largely a pedagogical issue which the wider digital humanities community may wish to consider in due course.

Certainly the students or researchers accessing *London Low Life* have not been left without supporting material to guide them through the collections. In particular, under 'Further Resources', users are encouraged to 'find your feet in Victorian London with our consultant editors' essays'. These are exceptionally useful for understanding the collections that have been digitised and I would strongly encourage both students and researchers to begin their exploration of this resource right here. Similarly, all users should be made aware of the useful dictionaries under this section and the bibliography (which I hope Adam Matthew Digital will continue to update). An alternative method for exploring the scope of *London Low Life* can be found in the visual resources section, which contains both image galleries (by theme) and online exhibitions. The latter, necessarily short exhibitions which are text light and image heavy, can only ever hope to glide briefly across a tiny sample of the material in the database, but do suggest some starting points for viewing the material and arouse anticipation and enthusiasm for getting stuck in (even if I thought there was far too little blood in the third exhibition!).

This brings me to the meat of this resource: the digitised documents. Apart from the quick access points on the front page, the documents in *London Low Life* can be viewed via searching or browsing. Given the great diversity of material the search facility is necessarily limited to general keywords or specific keywords from the title or author of an item, with some options to restrict results by either collection or document type. To assist users who want to experiment with searching, the editors have provided a list of 'popular searches', a feature that students let loose to find material for projects will certainly appreciate. As an active researcher in this area, I found that I enjoyed browsing much more, using the various categories provided by the editorial team to limit my lists (collection, document type and theme) because this process gave me both an understanding of the richness of the collection, its potential uses and the implications of its digitisation.

Overall, the digitised holdings in *London Low Life* amount to around 1386 items, some of these being quite substantial (for example, books and Gissing's scrapbook) while a large number are single sheets or small pamphlets. These latter items are of particular value. The resource contains a wide range of ephemeral material, from advertisements and broadsides to picture cards, chapbooks and cheap fiction. Although ephemera may well have comprised the bulk of reading material in previous centuries because it was cheap and widely circulated, its fragile quality and the tendency of contemporaries to discard these items once they had served their purpose has meant that much has been lost to us. Digitisation of ephemera is thus of great importance, most obviously for reasons of preservation, but also, by increasing access to limited collections, it will deepen our understanding of both culture and the workings of daily life for nearly every level of society. While browsing through the lists of contents, I was especially excited to find a copy of *Beeton's Penny Book of Cab Fares* (c.1872/4), a directory, rather than, say, a poster, but an item with a set shelf life

for the primary user. Only recently have historians begun to pay sufficient attention to these sources, showing how books of cab fares and railway timetables were designed in particular ways to communicate information rapidly and develop skills of literacy, and I hope that the inclusion of *Beeton's* and similar material in *London Low Life* will encourage researchers to continue to use ephemera in more creative ways.

[\(1\)](#)

Yet the discovery of *Beeton's* in the list of holdings immediately led me to question how much of this resource was focused on 'Low Life'? And so I conducted a rough survey based on the themes selected by the editors to describe the items in the collection. There seemed to be a good deal of crossover – one item could have multiple theme tags. However, it was notable that those themes most obviously connected with low life were associated with a relatively small proportion of items: for example, just over six per cent were tagged as 'crime and justice', around 4.5 per cent were tagged as 'disreputable London', and slightly fewer than 11 per cent were tagged as 'sex, prostitution and charity'. By far the largest number of items were tagged as 'street literature and popular print', around 66 per cent; this is unsurprising given the large number of chapbooks and the collection of street cries included. Many of these could be said to provide colour to 'low life', being images of street sellers contained in the street cries or being literature read by the lower classes or slum dwellers. But a few more clicks revealed that the second largest theme in the resource was 'geography and the built environment', with around 30 per cent of items tagged as such.

This experimentation with the thematic terms leads me to make two points with respect to this resource and its use. First, that *London Low Life* contains a vast array of material that is more about life in London than specifically 'low life'. No doubt this material serves to provide context to those items that do focus on low life, but it also has tremendous value apart from that, and I hope that the title of the resource does not limit its take-up or the great uses that this material could be put to in both teaching and research. Second, there is an element of messiness in this tagging by theme which I feel the editors have shied away from at times (for example, they should not be afraid of grouping fast guides with tourist guides under the heading tourism, because they did serve that purpose), but which they should relish. This is precisely where a large part of the value of this resource lies: in its problematisation of the term 'low life'. What were the boundaries of the Victorian underworld? Who was defined as low life – participants in illicit or illegal activities, or slum dwellers, or both? How should we define 'participation'? These were questions which the Victorians wrestled with and which we still have not yet satisfactorily answered.

Much of the material in *London Low Life* defies rigorous categorisation as the following summary of the documents demonstrates. This resource contains a range of items, often crude, produced by printers or entertainers in the lower classes for consumption by the lower classes, which did not contain overtly violent or pornographic content (themes usually associated with the 'low'), revealing evidence of a culture that was not necessarily respectable but also not offensive to those values. Next, we have a large number of similar products or entertainments, again produced by the people and for the people, that did draw upon 'low' themes, for example broadsides or penny fiction focusing on crime, human tragedy or scandal. Yet the producers and consumers of each of these were not necessarily exclusive. Similarly, some of the publishers of street literature were also involved in producing, alongside others of a slightly higher class background, a range of publications and entertainments which boasted semi-pornographic or scurrilous content and were targeted at a predominantly male and middle to upper class market. Moreover these producers found their copy and directed their consumers to activities in both low and high life. Finally, we are presented with a large number of publications produced by those who were not of the lower classes but presented street life, especially slum life, to respectable audiences, from the colourful vignettes of city wanderers or flâneurs to the exposés of the charitable and religious reformers, all of which offered captivated audiences a form of vicarious participation in 'low life'.

In other words, given the range of sources and possibilities, 'low life' had many dimensions and was, throughout the Victorian period, a shifting category, which, in different forms, permeated every level of society. Clear boundaries between the respectable and the unrespectable never existed. This is where the process of digitisation, and the options it offers us in viewing evidence from different angles, might help us

to better understand the term, and its role in Victorian society. The editors of *London Low Life* have already provided us with some signposts and suggestions, most notably in their use of interactive maps.

Adam Matthew Digital has not only digitised over 100 maps of London in the period c.1700 to c.1920, but, in partnership with Axis Maps LLC, they have brought these maps to life. For instance, by combining the collection of Tallis Street Views with a base map, 19th-century London is represented in 3-D: in much the same way as the well-known Google Street View, users are able to walk down the streets of London. If that function proves to be an excellent method for engaging students (which no doubt it will), the maps dealing with historic data, twinning population information with the provision of institutions and illustrating change over time, will certainly help to deepen their knowledge. However, for researchers, these interactive maps have the greatest potential when they attempt to chart the ‘data’ provided by the sources contained in the resource. It is possible to generate a map which shows the location of a number of entertainments (or parks or monuments) described in the documents. The editors have chosen to keep the representation of the data visual – at the moment, the entertainments that appear on the map are ones for which there are accompanying illustrations (and these are displayed when the icons on the map are activated, in a similar way to ‘street view’). This data thus adds to the attempt to make Victorian London ‘come alive’.

But I did wonder whether it might be possible to map ‘low life’ in a similar way. For instance, we could use maps to compare tourist guides and fast guides, to highlight the differences and similarities in the paths that these distinct types of pleasure-seekers travelled. A rapid keyword search for one of my favourite 19th-century entertainments, Madame Tussaud’s waxworks, revealed that the museum featured in both tourist guides and fast guides. How often did these two paths cross? Did some tourists have access to multiple guides, sampling pleasures from each if they found themselves in particular neighbourhoods? (I am sure they did, but some visual evidence would be helpful to back up what can only be supposition.) This is far from a criticism of *London Low Life*. Rather, the editors should be congratulated for encouraging researchers in this area to think about their source material in new ways.

In sum, this is an engaging and timely resource. In particular, it complements, without duplicating, a number of other resources released in the last three years, including the *John Johnson Collection: An Archive of Printed Ephemera*, *Old Bailey Online: The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* and *British Library Nineteenth-Century Newspapers*. By exposing source material previously difficult for many students and researchers to access, and encouraging users to employ technology as part of the analytical process, these resources have the potential to change the way we have approached the Victorian period and imagined life in London.

Notes

1. For example, as part of the recently funded AHRC project at Reading University, ‘Designing Information for Everyday Life, 1815-1914’. Key publications emerging from that project include Mike Esbester, ‘Nineteenth-century timetables and the history of reading’, *Book History*, 12 (2009), 156–185 and Paul Dobraszcyk, ‘Useful reading? Designing information for London’s Victorian cab passengers’, *Journal of Design History*, 21 (2008), 121–141. [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

[3]

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Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5461>

[2]

<http://www.amdigital.co.uk/collections/~~/media/Collections/LondonLowLife/London%20Low%20Life.ashx?dl=true>

[3] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>