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Sean Shesgreen, Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London

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Review

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There are significant regional gaps in the book's coverage. Although some of these, notably Devon and Yorkshire, are understandable insofar as they have already received effective coverage in earlier scholarship, other important localities such as the major towns of the Midlands and south Lancashire remain to be explored. In general this collection gives somewhat disproportionate attention to the rural south of England, and this limitation needs to be born in mind when overall inferences are drawn. Nevertheless, the chapters by Snape and Jenkins effectively indicate that by 1800 the stresses of industrialization and rapid population growth were beginning to expose significant Anglican structural weaknesses in other parts of the country. Also, while all the authors make some attempt to cover the whole of the period, particular chronological points of focus vary, with several chapters drawing heavily on late seventeenth-century material, and appearing relatively thin on the decades after 1750. This chronological selectivity compounds the effect of the geographical one in causing the book as a whole to give insufficient attention to the pressures of the dawning industrial age. Coverage of political dimensions is also chronologically uneven, with several contributors offering interesting analysis of the local ramifications of late Stuart and early Hanoverian religious politics, but no one devoting significant attention to the church's response to the radicalism of the second half of the eighteenth century.

This book does not in itself provide a convincing new overall interpretation of the eighteenth-century church, but it represents a very significant advance in detailed knowledge, which helps to provide a basis for future synthesis. Such an enterprise, moreover, would be a task better performed by a single author than in a collection of essays, although Jenkins's splendid survey of Wales helps to point the way to what might be achieved on a broader English canvas. It is to be hoped that in due course one or more of the contributors will rise to this greater challenge.

The Open University

JOHN WOLFFE

Sean Shesgreen. *Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press. 2002. Pp. Xi, 228. \$30.00 paper. ISBN 0-8135-3152-7.

Sean Shesgreen sets himself a daunting task in *Images of the Outcast*: to introduce the reader to an unfamiliar genre of early modern prints while simultaneously explaining their significance both in their own era and in ours. Although crammed with illustrations and information about artists and provenance, it is far from an obscure work of reference. Its seven chapters are self-contained essays, each developing its theme independently of the rest, and the whole work fulfills the author's aim of analyzing the designs "sympathetically and historically, seeking to discover how they were created, sold, bought and enjoyed" (p. 16). The result is not only a fascinating review of the London social scene but also a convincing commentary on the function of a popular art form that has never been treated so thoroughly.

The "Cries" of London were images of the street vendors and urban characters of the English capital whose depiction became stereotyped over the period from the late sixteenth to the mid nineteenth century, evolving in the direction "not of increasing realism but of increasing idealism" (p.18). Thus, despite the emergent sociological grittiness reflected in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1862), the pictures it contained were in fact shaped by a long tradition that ultimately veered towards nostalgia. Milkmaids, knife-grinders, chair-menders, and chimney-sweeps had been catalogued first in Elizabethan

broadsheets, then in “ensembles,” and finally in children’s books and even playing cards. (Today “the four of clubs” might be a former Iraqi official; in 1759, for example, he was a shoeblack.) Shesgreen possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of the surviving evidence, and he succeeds in analyzing it at three interlocking levels—aesthetic, cultural, and social—demonstrating the “relationships within works and among them” (pp. 16–17).

In a study that draws upon art criticism, literary theories of representation, and social history, impenetrable prose might be feared. Instead Shesgreen appeals to the “excitement of looking” (p. 16), and the illustrations are cleverly juxtaposed so as to facilitate comparison of the images under discussion. The influence of the growing metropolitan market becomes apparent not just in the subject matter of the prints—the manual trades and commerce carried on by the lower orders over four centuries—but also in the power of booksellers and publishers, as they sought to please wealthy collectors in search of the most fashionable new version of time-worn themes. Shesgreen shows how the images developed from static tableaux of the sheer bounty and variety of the goods and services newly available to seventeenth-century Londoners into dynamic scenes of social interaction, often accompanied by an edifying text. As street-hawkers and even ragged children came to be seen as more of a threat to polite society, some artists portrayed them less sympathetically. On the other hand, Shesgreen makes a good case that the scenes painted by Francis Wheatley became popular because they encouraged well-to-do buyers to admire the condescension of their own class towards the humble poor (p.133). By the Victorian era, the “Cries” had incorporated the didactic as well as the decorative.

And what of the artists’ own motives? It was two foreigners, Marcellus Laroon and Jacob Amigoni, who refined the broadsheet format by depicting costume with greater care and portraying individual characters, often in a sentimental fashion. The work of William Hogarth and the lesser known Paul Sandby represented a deliberate rejection of this Continental idealism in favor of a realistic depiction of “England’s capital as a place of division and conflict” (p. 129). As Shesgreen notes, these are indeed themes of interest to “skeptical historians” who want to know what these prints reveal about the identity and appearance of London’s lower orders. Laroon, who is the subject of an earlier study by Shesgreen (*The Criers and Hawkers of London, Engravings and Drawings by Marcus Laroon* [1990]), first introduced into the canon of London “Cries” marginal characters like whores, cutpurses, and false beggars. Shesgreen supplies intriguing background to such figures. One indigent woman with two clinging children is identified as a “sturdy pauper” named Nan Mills (on the authority of no less than Samuel Pepys, himself an avid collector!), and we are told that the children may well have been “rented” for their roles, a practice described in the diary of an eighteenth-century visitor to London (p. 70).

Shesgreen’s work is informed by wide reading, and most of his conclusions ring true. To say that Hogarth and Sandby were “belligerent artists expressing felt ideological positions” (p. 132) seems hyperbolic, perhaps, and one might think that with his description of the bellman and rat-catcher as Protestant “icons of protection,” Shesgreen has finally overreached. Then on the next page, he quotes from a poem by the contemporary Robert Herrick that appears to confirm the point nicely. Look, read, and enjoy.

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