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# 1

## *Introduction*

Gypsy-travellers occupy a unique position in sedentary-based societies by virtue of their physical and ideological distance from the main features and trends of the host structures. They stand apart from the majority of the population both culturally and economically, with their resistance to incorporation into the wage-labour market and persistent reliance on the family as the key economic unit serving to isolate them as a distinctive fringe group in any society which stresses permanency and settlement. It would, though, be an exaggeration to suggest that Gypsy-travellers occupied a central and prominent position in relation to the major issues emerging through the dramatic years of nineteenth-century industrialisation. Nevertheless they did drift in and out of the margins of the debate, touching along the way such areas as economic change and the role of itinerancy in the developing economy, and the changing aspects of leisure and culture. Responses from settled society brought into sharp relief the nature of policing and controlling a marginal, minority group, highlighting the expanding role of the state and the processes of policy-making. The function of evangelism and the reclamation of heathens to spiritual and secular responsibility and respectability needs to be seen in this context.

In order to make sense of the emergent industrial society and its consequent evils religious bodies adopted a stridently evangelical tone. In searching for evidence of amorality, irreligion and idleness many of the new missionaries decided to look no further than the camps of the Gypsies. In the laissez-faire age of the early nineteenth century responsibility for the supervision of the Gypsy-travellers was left predominantly in the hands of these evangelical and voluntary bodies, though this should not be taken to imply that the state did not play a supportive role. Increasingly this voluntary system came to be replaced by more extensive state initiatives, at local and national level, in which the endeavours of George Smith of Coalville formed an important milestone. In carrying on the grand British tradition of philanthropy he continued and extended the work of evangelical Christianity into more secular forms, taking his crusade not only to the subjects of his concern but also to the public at large and to Parliament. But the question of



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responses is not merely one of conflict between travelling and settled cultures. The particular case of the Gypsy-traveller is further complicated by the imposition of the concept of race on the travelling structure, constructing hierarchies according to racial characteristics. The three major themes which emerge are, therefore, the role of travellers as a mobile labour force and the pressure for change from modernising influences; the position of a group marginal to the socialising instruments of an industrialising society; and, finally, the identification of a minority by reference to culture and race, explanations which could be both complementary and contradictory.

Each of these various areas forms the basis of major historical enquiries and controversies, addressing important conceptual problems concerning the nature of the state and the methods of maintaining conformity and consensus in a society undergoing fundamental transformation. Rather than concentrating the scope of this study I decided in favour of a more expansive approach in the hope of highlighting the links and overlaps between each theme. Evangelism blended with philanthropy, both travelling alongside state policy-making. The policing of travellers involved a complex system of formal and informal arrangements, which in turn raised questions of public versus private duty. The arguments used by the defenders of the repressive policies directed against the travellers combined notions of criminality and race with heathenism, economic rationality and the imposition of minimum standards of health and education. Moral and religious reasoning were thus balanced by an economic and political rationale, both appealing to instinctive common sense as the foundation for support. A survey of the whole period shows that the motivation for these responses, their articulation and expression, stemmed from and borrowed different arguments as justification. But such a study also reveals that the purpose of each response, the desired long-term goal, was remarkably similar: to bring an end to the economic, social, political, religious, cultural and ideological embarrassment caused by a particular group of people.

Choosing to look at this section of the travelling community over a period of dramatic and fundamental change created a number of difficulties. Chief of these was the problem of retaining a clear sight of the very different worlds in which the Gypsies found themselves from the beginning of the period under survey until the end, especially in the face of strong elements of continuity among the group itself. Gypsy-travellers were by no means unaffected by the major changes taking place in society and the economy, yet their main features of self-employment and the adoption of travelling as a way of life remained the stable bases of their existence. In this sense it is possible to see the retention of basic characteristics from pre-industrial times through to the period of advanced industrialisation. Other groups and classes experienced profound changes in relation to work, leisure and political life but although the life-style of the Gypsy-traveller was affected it did not radically alter.

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Always prepared to adopt and adapt, the Gypsies managed to hold on to their basic identity. It is the negotiation with the developments taking place in wider society and the economy that forms the central strand running throughout this work.

In the early decades of the century the travellers performed significant roles in the imperfect supply and demand conditions of the time, contributing goods and services to the economic and social life of the village. When the emphasis within the domestic economy shifted from the rural to the urban sector this role was exposed as an anachronistic and unwanted vestige of a past stage in economic development. Always morally and ideologically unacceptable to the dominant culture of sedentary society the travellers, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, had also lost much of their former importance and relevance in the socio-economic sphere. At this moment the marginality of travellers to the structures of a sedentary-based, industrialising state became increasingly apparent and the problem of the accommodation of the travelling population then became a matter of much concern. Travellers were seen to stand apart from the cultural and ideological pressures towards conformity with a settled way of life and so with regular employments and deference to strict time-discipline, both features becoming more evident as the century progressed. Their way of life was seen as unnecessary, causing more problems of a practical and ideological nature than their existence was likely to solve. The state had come to play a growing part in controlling the industrial workforce, in the factory and the home, and this group existing on the margins of society was not to be exempted from attention.

This is to express the problem in terms of the specific context of the relationship between travellers and the structures and mechanisms of a developing, capitalist state. Although it is necessary to take account of the particular political and economic nature of the dominant society, it is also important that the frame of reference and analysis should not be too narrow. Antipathy to travellers was not restricted to a particular epoch or political system, but was rooted in a long-standing conflict between the travelling and sedentary ways of life. The expression of this conflict in the nineteenth century came most vociferously from the supporters of the emergent bourgeois ideology, which denigrated the traveller and the itinerant way of life for standing opposed to the forces of civilisation and advance. At times this appeared in the guise of concerned religious agencies and individuals who combined notions of industriousness and thrift with those of moral rescue and the evangelistic desire to save certain groups in society from themselves. On other occasions the clamour for control was more directly associated with officialdom and authority, with police and local government officers shouting together for suppression. Behind all the cries was the sometimes active but more usually tacit approval of sedentary citizens.

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Individuals were often able to establish favourable associations with the Gypsies, chiefly by means of a useful and acceptable economic and social relationship, but society as a corporate body voiced unanimous opposition. The cautious acceptance of the early part of the century was increasingly replaced by unqualified intolerance. Impressions borrowed from numerous sources enabled the various agencies to embroider their arguments with racial categories which established a hierarchy among travellers containing Romanies, didakais or half-bloods, and *gorgios* or *gaujos* (non-Gypsies).

From the twin elements of nomadism and racial separateness developed a host of stereotypes about travellers which in turn profoundly affected responses. In general, all classes were united in their antipathy but, unlike the case of other minority groups, whether racially or culturally defined, popular persecution of travellers was not rooted in fears of real or perceived threats to jobs or status but rather in contempt for alleged parasites made such by the travelling ways of life and/or hereditary factors. Although much of the animosity was directed specifically at itinerancy itself this was frequently embellished by differentiating the habits and ways of travelling people according to racial characteristics.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to the association of a group of travellers with a Romany race came with the formation of the Gypsy Lore Society. In 1877 a letter appeared in the journal *Notes and Queries* requesting that interested persons set about collecting Gypsy songs and ballads as it was feared that Gypsy camps were rapidly disappearing from the commons and lanes and with them was vanishing a unique culture. The feeling grew among folk lorists that they had a duty to capture and preserve the history of the Gypsies before it was lost altogether. A reply to this letter suggested that a club or correspondence society be formed for this specific purpose. From these initial promptings and under the initiative and leadership of David MacRitchie of Edinburgh, the Gypsy Lore Society was founded in 1888.[1]

The declared objective of the society was to investigate the Gypsy question 'in as thorough and many-sided manner as possible'.[2] Membership was to be world-wide and the hope was to save Gypsy lore from exinction in every corner of the globe. The members' findings were to be published quarterly in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*. In practice the 'thorough' investigation of the Gypsy problem meant research into the language, history, ethnology and folk lore of the Gypsy race. The members of the Society saw the problem in terms of questions concerning origins and their intention was to identify the 'true' Gypsies and locate them as a race apart. The emphasis was firmly and almost exclusively on kinship and cultural patterns and not on social change or politics. The Society appeared at the time of the debate surrounding the registration and regulation of van- and tent-dwellers by means of the Moveable Dwellings Bill, yet the contributors to the Journal turned their backs on current issues and continued their searches for a dying language

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and genealogical lines. Controversial topics were noticeable only by their absence. The lorists were concerned about a decaying language and culture but not about a threatened and persecuted people. By avoiding such problems as registration, enforced settlement and harassment they distanced themselves from the present-day reality of Gypsy existence and looked only for the myth and mystery of Gypsies in the past.

However, by 1892 the Journal had ceased to exist and the Society entered a period of decline lasting fifteen years. Renewed concern about the Gypsy question in the opening years of the twentieth century perhaps contributed to the Society's revival in 1907. During this period the Gypsy was under threat of persecution and harassment almost as great as anything experienced in the past. In England there were attempts at control by means of the Moveable Dwellings and Children's Bills and active persecution by local authorities. It was even rumoured that representatives were to be sent to a proposed European conference, to be held at Berne in the summer of 1908, to discuss methods of ending for good the Gypsy 'disgrace'. Support for the proposal was mixed: some praised this attempt to rid civilised society of the 'dregs of humanity',[3] while others, less in evidence, condemned it as a genocidal conspiracy by the statesmen of Europe 'to wipe out the last traces of the Romany from the Western Continent'.[4] The atmosphere and mood forced the revitalised Gypsy Lore Society to acknowledge that the Gypsy did not live in a social and political vacuum, immersed in strange taboos and ancient rites. Articles were at last published in the Journal relating to political matters. However, concern about social and political issues did not last and the social-anthropological and folk-lore content remained dominant. The discovery of new dialects excited more interest among the Society's academicians, philologists and ethnologists than did new instances of repression and persecution. The war again caused the Society to enter a second period of decline which was not to be reversed until 1922.

The contemporary importance of the various issues surrounding a nomadic population, and especially this issue of race and racial stereotyping, is made readily apparent by even a cursory look through recent newspapers or by glancing at the television. Relations between a travelling and a settled society still show the same degree of conflict and antagonism seen in the nineteenth century. Often the same arguments, based on myths, inaccuracies and generalisations, are repeated time and again. Newspaper reports illustrate the persistence of persecution and local authority harassment; television programmes can still take the title 'They Steal Children, Don't They?'; and active members of anti-Gypsy organisations shout about the 'filth and pestilence' surrounding a group who 'are not humans', offering petrol bombs as their solution.[5] Likewise, the notion of the 'true' Gypsy is still called forth with the same degree of conviction as at the end of the nineteenth century. The superstitious aura engulfing the Romany lingers on with, for

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example, the disastrous fire at the Alexandra Palace in London in the summer of 1980 being blamed by some on a 100-year-old Gypsy curse uttered when they were turned off their camp site so the Palace could be built.[6] Many people today would also tell a similar story to that of Gaius Carley who, writing of his childhood in Sussex in the 1890s, recalls laughing at a Gypsy woman who had a hole in her stocking. In retaliation the woman put a curse on the incautious writer: 'She put the wind up me properly. I have been careful who I have laughed at since.'[7] The similarities between the arguments and stereotypes used, and the hostility and persecution shown in the 1880s and 1980s, are striking in their closeness and consistency. Antipathy to the travelling population remains virulent and virtually unanimous. There is no more a workable solution being offered now than there was 100 years ago concerning the question of how successfully to accommodate this marginal group.

The three themes mentioned in the opening paragraphs form the organising strands that run throughout the various parts of this study. The first section comprises the empirical base by means of its discussion of the Gypsy population in England and Wales, locating it geographically, socially and economically, and illustrating by examples the texture of everyday travelling life. This is followed by an assessment of the fundamental issue of ascriptions, perceptions, images and stereotyping. Essentially, there were three main definitions of a Gypsy which though different were not necessarily mutually exclusive. These covered a romantic race, a degenerate race and a group of outcast travellers. Responses were conditioned and informed by stereotypes evolving from each of these. The term 'Gypsy' could thus be applied to a racial elite to be found at the top of the pyramidal ordering said to exist among travellers. It could also apply, in a generic sense, to a much larger group of travellers sharing a way of life and having occupations in common, though identifiable from the artisan or vagrant traveller by cultural differences, a tendency to live and camp in groups and their adoption of a variety of self-employments. This incorporates regional and temporal variations in the ascriptions given to the travellers, as well as combining under one heading the many terms used to differentiate between the group according to such criteria as occupation, appearance, name, language and race. By this definition, which is the one adopted throughout the book, all gipsies, Gypsies, Egyptians, pretended Egipcions, fortune-tellers, tent-dwellers, van-dwellers, didakais and tinklers are grouped together.

The remainder of the work is concerned with responses to this varied travelling community from sections of the host, sedentary society. Historically the response of any society to the presence of Gypsies has been at best qualified tolerance and, at worst, open hostility and persecution, with the arguments used to justify this depending on irrationality, superstition and

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blind fear as much as on balanced and logical reasoning. The persecutors found their excuses in differences, alleged and real, in the areas of culture, race, religion and criminality. Each of these was said to reveal the Gypsies not only as separate and distinct but also, and importantly, as harmful to the interests of the community and the nation state. In contrast to the new ways of civilised, industrial society their culture was seen as backward and primitive. To add to this, their racial characteristics were thought to incline them towards dishonesty and deceit, heathenism, immorality and a profound disinclination to any form of honest and productive toil. In reaction to the presence of such a group who could be criticised, feared and scorned on any number of accounts, religious and philanthropic individuals and agencies led the way in the early nineteenth century in an organised endeavour to reform and settle the travelling population. They were assisted in their efforts by the generally persecutory activities of the police and magistrates, themselves responsible for the control and surveillance of the marginal and deviant sections of society. Following this came attempts by philanthropists and local authorities to secure effective legislation to curb the Gypsy 'menace'. Formal and informal agents of the dominant culture worked together, though not always harmoniously, in an attempt to find an effective solution to the itinerant 'problem'.

By looking in this way at responses to travellers and travelling it is hoped that the position of itinerants in society, and the relationship between this group and the settled population, will be clarified. Clearly this could not be achieved by looking at the nature of travelling life alone. It is also necessary to show how and why the travellers were defined and perceived by various organisations and agencies, from evangelist missions and the legislature to local authority reports and literature.

Any attempt at reconstructing the nomadic way of life in the nineteenth century, and how it was seen and understood by the travellers themselves, must inevitably be flawed and incomplete as they left behind very little in the form of written records. Theirs was primarily an oral culture which it is now unfortunately too late to tap by detailed social-anthropological survey. But to say they left little is not to suggest that autobiographical material by travellers is non-existent. Extensive research into working class autobiographies of this period has revealed a number of useful items relating to travellers and itinerancy.[8] Autobiographies written by travellers take a variety of forms, partly a reflection of the different backgrounds of the authors and of the extent of their association with the travellers' culture. Works written by navvies, vagrants and tramping artisans contain much of merit and interest but only in exceptional circumstances did the authors abandon their links with sedentary society. It was usually the case that their contact with an itinerant life-style was temporary and short-term. Life histories by those able to claim a stronger attachment to the travelling culture, by ancestry or long-

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term rejection of settled habits, were fewer in number and again vary greatly in their value. Perhaps the best known is *The Book of Boswell: Autobiography of a Gypsy* (1970), a transcript of a tape-recording made by Silvester Gordon Boswell and containing a most useful account of his life on the roads. Of less value is the disappointing and misleading work by Samuel Loveridge, entitled *No. 747. Being the Autobiography of a Gipsy* [1891]. Although allegedly written by Loveridge the narrative was put into 'an acceptable literary and publishable form' by 'F. W. Carew', the pseudonym of A. E. C. Way. While he includes some comment on travelling the author spent only five years on the road (when aged nine to fourteen), and much of the remainder of the text describes his life in service. For a later period the various volumes of reminiscences of Dominic Reeve[9] provide a welcome challenge to the romantic illusions found in Petulengro's *A Romany Life* (1935), Manfri Wood's *In the Life of a Romany Gypsy* (1973), and the didactic evangelism of Cornelius and Rodney Smith.[10]

On the whole, then, information on the travellers has to come from outside observers, some of whom had a great deal of contact with the people while others had little or none and wrote more from hearsay and speculation than fact. Of considerable value in locating the large number of printed items relating to Gypsies and travelling is a volume entitled *A Gypsy Bibliography*, compiled by George Black and published in Edinburgh in 1914 (a provisional issue appeared five years earlier). Black lists references to works relating to European and British Gypsies providing a full, if not entirely accurate, checklist of several hundred items. This has recently been brought up to date in a supplementary volume by Dennis Binns. Further guides to printed works can also be found in the catalogues of the Scott Macfie Gypsy Collection at the University of Liverpool and the Romany Collection at the University of Leeds.[11]

The quality and value of the many items available in printed form have proved to be highly uneven. To impose a rather simplified model on the various works, they can be said to favour one of the definitions outlined earlier. Although the mixing of stereotypes by some writers and the ambiguous and contradictory nature of some works could make the classification awkward, it was nevertheless generally the case that one tendency dominated their writings. This enables us to identify whether the author was describing a separate race, romantic or degenerate, or a larger cultural grouping of travellers.

The writers who claimed to have identified a separate race of Romany Gypsies were to be found mainly in the romantic school of fictional writers or else associated with the Gypsy Lore Society, though their influences clearly would have extended further than these narrow confines suggest. Writings of people such as George Borrow and the mainstays of the Gypsy Lore movement, notably Henry Crofton, Charles Leland and Francis Hindes

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Groome, were very much a part of a general trend in Victorian thought that emphasised race and origins. Having found variation among travellers and identified foreign origins, theories of genetics were then used, often crudely and deterministically, to explain the characteristics of the group. In such a way a framework was formed within which responses were conditioned. Also in accordance with contemporary concerns, more was written about language and etymology than about the people themselves.

Yet despite these important reservations, these writers and the large number of contributors who published articles in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* offer perhaps the most substantial and essential of all the many and various sources, not least because of their bulk. If read with a care to criticism, an eye for omissions and a realisation of the attempt to impose false limitations on the group selected for study, then much of value can be extracted. A major drawback of this source is the tendency to fall into a comfortable acceptance of the opinions expressed and to become complacently convinced of the importance of ceremony and ritual in the everyday lives of the travellers. Such a failure is most clearly in evidence in the recent work of Elwood Trigg.[12]

Standing alongside these essentially racial works were those by authors who, though they may have subscribed to a belief in the existence of the Romany Gypsy, were not concerned with locating a separate race but instead sought to advertise the conditions of life of a large travelling group urgently demanding the attention of reformers. John Hoyland and James Crabb were among the first to publish works with this emphasis, and their importance was not missed by later writers who frequently drew from them for evidence.[13]

The 1880s were perhaps the heyday of the Gypsy as a subject, with articles published in a wide array of newspapers and journals. Much of the responsibility for the attention given to the Gypsy 'problem' must rest with the philanthropist George Smith of Coalville. Having turned to the issue of the reform of the children of travellers, he published widely and profusely on the subject. Many criticisms can be levelled at his first book dealing with this matter, *Gipsy Life: being an Account of our Gipsies and their Children, with Suggestions for their Improvement*, published in 1880. It is badly written and poorly argued, relying on exaggeration to draw lurid pictures and on anecdote combining freely with hearsay and factual information. Although the more serious of these problems were rectified in later books his distorted arguments remained convincing to an audience wanting to be convinced.[14] This presentation of wild speculation and unsupported assertions in the form of factual 'truths' can be seen in works as varied as W. and J. Simson's *A History of the Gipsies* (1865) and miscellaneous government publications.

Serious research into travellers and itinerancy has been steadily increasing in recent years, originating from various disciplines and revealing many

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approaches and perspectives.[15] At no time since the late nineteenth century has the question of the travelling population received such attention. It is hoped that the flaws and weaknesses of earlier works are not repeated, here and elsewhere.

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