

Introduction

In June 1822 Charles Lamb published his essay ‘A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis’. Witty and urbane, Lamb twits the utilitarian reformers who have confined London’s beggars in prisons and workhouses and now seek to ‘extirpate the last fluttering tatters of the bugbear Mendicity’. He claims that before they were incarcerated beggars performed an important social function: they were ‘the standing morals, emblems, mementos, dial-mottos, the spital sermons, the books for children, the salutary checks and pauses to the high and rushing tide of greasy citizenry’. Here dehumanisation is idealisation. Like the lessons inscribed on sundials, and the ‘spital sermons’ preached at Easter, beggars prompt divine reflection. Also, in contrast to the hypermobile crowd, they are permanent fixtures of the city, waymarkers rooted in its physical fabric. Beggars therefore help citizens to navigate the spiritual and physical pitfalls of nineteenth-century London; they are a means of moral, historical and geographical orientation. But the beggars’ existence is not just a social good, it is good in itself. ‘If I were not the independent gentleman that I am’, Lamb claims, ‘I would chuse, out of the delicacy of the true greatness of my mind, to be a Beggar.’ After all, he reasons, the beggar’s rags are ‘never out of the fashion’; ‘the price of stock or land affecteth him not’; and ‘no man goes to law with him’. The beggar ‘is the only free man in the universe’.¹

Lamb’s essay is facetious, but it is also sympathetic. This sympathy is sometimes directed towards individuals, such as the crippled ‘half a Hercules’ and the ‘old blind Tobits’ ranged along ‘the wall of Lincoln’s Inn Garden’; but more generally, it concerns the loss of what the beggars represent – an older, more liberal, less materialistic time.² This is reflected in the deliberately antiquated metaphors that Lamb uses to describe the beggars’ spiritual functions. Spital sermons date back to the late fourteenth century and the dial-mottos are equally venerable.³ In an earlier essay Lamb fondly recalls the ‘antique air [of] the now almost effaced

sun-dials, with their moral inscriptions' in London's Inner Temple. These relics carry an intrinsic merit: 'if its business-use be superseded by more elaborate inventions', Lamb observes, 'its moral uses, its beauty, might have pleaded for its continuance. It spoke of moderate labours, of pleasures not protracted after sun-set, of temperance, and good hours.'⁴ Like the beggars who steady the 'rushing tide' of the crowd, the dials symbolise a less frenetic mode of life that constitutes a form of freedom. For Lamb, it was this freedom from excessive work and excessive pleasure, from the worldly concerns of fashions, stocks and litigation, which 'the all-sweeping besom of societarian reformation' was slowly wearing away.⁵

Lamb's political position in 'The Decay of Beggars' is anti-utilitarian and his chief target is London's Society for the Suppression of Mendicity.⁶ Established in 1818 by radicals and evangelicals, the Mendicity Society was one of several philanthropic organisations founded in the early nineteenth century that sought to halt the rapid escalation of pauperism, vagrancy and the national poor rate.⁷ This had grown from £4.3 million in 1803 to £7.83 million in 1818.⁸ The Mendicity Society was formed in the wake of the 1816 *Report from the Select Committee on the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis*, which found that 'gross and monstrous frauds [were] practiced by mendicants in the capital'.⁹ It therefore set out to educate the public about the duplicitous nature of beggars and to identify and prosecute 'committed' or 'professional' vagrants – the destitute and/or itinerant people for whom begging was a lifeline, a strategy for survival. The society was successful. In its first annual report the Honorary Secretary W. H. Bodkin remarked that it had 'certainly succeeded in convincing a great portion of the public of the impolicy of indiscriminate almsgiving [and] in punishing many daring imposters' – a total of 385 in 1818.¹⁰ In the following years between 1819 and 1822, when Lamb's essay was published, the Society successfully instigated a further 1,263 prosecutions.¹¹

It was the austere attitude of the fiscally minded Mendicity Society that Lamb was writing against. By idealising beggars – by recasting the so-called impostors as emblems of morality, and interpreting their poverty as a superlative freedom – he was trying to overturn the dogmatic and worldly outlook of evangelical reformers. In doing so he reasserted the value of beggars. Where the Mendicity Society warned the public to 'let investigation always precede relief, and approached them as subjects harbouring a single truth, Lamb regarded them as emblems, books and mottos with multiple interpretations and rich rewards for readers.¹² This characterisation consciously echoes William Wordsworth's portrayal of the indigent in his poem 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' (1800).¹³ Here Wordsworth also

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entertains an anti-utilitarian agenda. He deploys the same image of the ‘besom of societarian reformation’, condemning statesmen ‘who have a broom still ready in your hands / To rid the world of nuisances’. Moreover, he represents the vagrant as a prompt for virtue and a symbol to be studied: ‘While thus he creeps / From door to door, the Villagers in him / Behold a record which together binds / Past deeds and offices of charity / Else unremembered’.¹⁴

Lamb’s beggars and Wordsworth’s vagrant perform the same social functions and belong to the same tradition of representation: what Celeste Langan calls ‘Romantic vagrancy’. In her influential work, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (1995), Langan defines this concept as ‘a certain idealization of the vagrant: a reduction and an abstraction. The vagrant’s mobility and expressivity are abstracted from their determining social conditions.’¹⁵ This critique is useful for understanding the portrayal of poverty in Lamb’s essay. Hunger, fatigue, unemployment, addiction, exposure – these do not trouble his beggars. However, the essay also qualifies what might be at stake in the process of idealisation that Langan describes because it demonstrates that ‘abstraction’ does not necessarily entail the loss of meaning implied by ‘reduction’. Indeed, with his emphasis on how beggars might be read and re-read, Lamb was trying to combat a process of reduction in which beggars, and the freedoms that they represented, were redefined and delimited. The binaries that the Mendicity Society relied on – ‘the infirm and the able bodied, the industrious and the idle, the deserving and the vicious’ – and the categories that they later used to taxonomise London’s beggars – casual beggars, Irish and Scotch beggars, black and foreign beggars, beggars with country settlements, and beggars with London settlements – all tended to contract what and how the indigent could mean.¹⁶

The impulse of the Mendicity Society to identify the indigent and expose their motives is typical of later approaches towards vagrancy. Victorian attitudes were likewise characterised by a materialist approach to poverty and were concerned with diagnosing, defining and controlling the vagrant body. Where Romantic vagrancy abstracted, Victorian vagrancy concretised. This is evident in the lexicon of vagrancy which expanded in the nineteenth century to include ‘loafers’, ‘mouchers’, ‘casuals’, ‘beachcombers’, ‘toe-rags’, ‘spike-rangers’, ‘pikers’ and ‘sun-downers’, among others. Some of these coinages, such as ‘piker’ and ‘toe-rag’, were colourful synonyms for ‘vagrant’, and chiefly used in a derogatory sense; but most had more precise meanings and identified

specific vagrant types that occupied certain topographies. The ‘beach-comber’, ‘wedded to the Pacific’, was imagined in Oceania; the ‘loafer’ was considered ‘an urban type in the main . . . who haunts the streets year in year out’; and the ‘moucher’ was a hedgerow tramp, picking up a living from poaching, begging and foraging.¹⁷ To a greater or lesser extent, these terms circulated in official, literary, legal and popular discourses, and together with familiar categories, such as ‘Gypsy’ and ‘vagabond’, shaped public conceptions of vagrancy by providing a taxonomy through which vagrants could be mapped imaginatively and geographically.

The desire to categorise vagrant bodies, however, was not a new phenomenon: it was part of a tradition stretching back to the early modern period. In the sixteenth century a ‘literature of rogues’ emerged which presented readers with a highly stratified and specialised underworld in which vagrants were split into numerous criminal orders. Thomas Harman’s catalogue of rogues, *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursetors* (1566), was one of the first texts purporting to detail vagrant life and is a fine example of this tradition: it includes a list of 200 vagabond types.¹⁸ This genre was supplemented by Robert Greene’s and Thomas Dekker’s cony-catching pamphlets at the turn of the seventeenth century, and later by the ‘rogue ballad’. Printed as broadsides and accompanied by woodcuts, these were performed in public and private across the social spectrum, and portrayed an array of vagrant stereotypes that ranged from the uncanny beggar woman to the jovial tinker.¹⁹ Later, in the eighteenth-century, pictorial representations of hawkers and street-sellers – itinerant traders who were readily identified as vagrants – became popular. Like the pamphlets and ballads, these pictures, known as ‘cries’, produced a series of readily identifiable types.²⁰

These genres entertained the same assumption expressed by writers in the Victorian period, that despite their many guises, each vagrant ultimately possessed a stable, classifiable identity. This belief was underpinned by a moral framework that partitioned the poor into two separate classes, the deserving and the undeserving. The former were the virtuous poor who were impoverished through no fault of their own and were the deserving recipients of compassion and charity. The latter were feckless, idle, lawless and deceptive. They were seen as able-bodied imposters who should be denied alms and punished. Leaving little room for nuance, this binary structured responses to homelessness and transiency from the late medieval period onwards, and articulated a deep distrust of the poor. Summarising the historical attitudes of Western societies towards the itinerant and the destitute, Tim Cresswell observes that ‘The drifter, the shiftless, the refugee and the asylum seeker have been inscribed with immoral intent.’²¹

Suspicious of immorality were often accompanied by fears of political dissonance. Between 1560 and 1640, vagrants were identified as a potential source of rebellion. During this period, England's armies were predominantly formed by poor young men who returned from war with few skills and prospects. Unemployed and habituated to travel, these veterans took to tramping and were perceived as an enemy army in embryo.²² Later, during the interregnum, a different mobile class came under suspicion. The early Quakers were associated with spiritual and social anarchism and were accused of being a seditious force within the country. Although Quakers were often people of means, their practice of itinerant preaching meant that they could be classed as wanderers and charged as vagrants. They were therefore frequently punished under the vagrancy laws by magistrates who saw them as a threat to social and religious stability.²³ After the Restoration, other itinerant groups came under scrutiny. James II's government issued a proclamation in 1686 against unlicensed hawkers for allegedly peddling seditious and atheistic books; and similarly, in the eighteenth century, strolling balladeers were arrested in London for singing Jacobite and anti-Hanoverian songs.²⁴ This connection between mobility and disorder persisted in the nineteenth century. Thomas Carlyle, writing in the aftermath of the Continental revolutions of 1848, described vagrants as 'captainless soldiers', the 'destroyers of every Government that *cannot* put them under captains, and send them upon enterprises'. The threat that Carlyle identified in these 'able-bodied Lackalls' was echoed by many of his contemporaries, and the links that they perceived between vagrancy and insurrection are examined in several of this book's chapters.²⁵

When the Victorians represented the wandering poor, they deployed a range of strategies and biases inherited from previous periods. However, new epistemologies and ways of knowing also impacted the portrayal of vagrants. This was particularly true of racial theories. Among these, one of the most influential was the theory of extinction, the idea that all 'savage' peoples would eventually vanish from the earth. Like all racist discourses, extinction theory was based upon prejudice rather than fact, and as a result it was an inchoate and shifting structure of interpretation rather than a rigorous set of principles. Extinction might be actuated through war, or through disease, or through acculturation with European civilisation; but one of the more popular beliefs was that the inherited traits of the savage would eventually lead to self-extermination. This prognosis of autogenocide was conferred on many of the non-European cultures that the British encountered between the early 1800s and the Second World War.²⁶ In addition, it was also applied to nomads and vagrants in the Victorian

period. Gypsies and indigenous Americans were perceived as self-destroying from the early nineteenth century: identified as racial others in the cultural imagination, they were readily counted among the primitives who would extinguish themselves. ‘Anglo-Saxon’ vagrants joined these groups towards the end of the century. By the 1880s it was generally believed that white vagrants in distant lands, like the beachcombers in the Pacific, were also destined for extinction: having ‘gone native’, and regressed into savagery, they would inevitably perish alongside the indigenes.

The elision between the vagrant and the savage is unsurprising. Attributes that Victorian commentators identified as primitive, such as lawlessness, laziness and promiscuity, had long been ascribed to the vagrant poor in England. As Linda Woodbridge remarks in her analysis of early modern representations of vagrancy, ‘The respectable projected onto vagrants qualities they disowned in themselves – social mobility, linguistic innovation, sexual misconduct, sedition, idleness.’²⁷ Some of these ancient stereotypes were repackaged as essential and inherited traits in racial readings of the vagrant poor. Moreover, in these interpretations, the vagrant’s mobility could also become a sign of savagery, as Henry Mayhew’s introduction to *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861–2) reveals. Heavily influenced by James Cowles Prichard’s ethnographic study, *Natural History of Man* (1843), Mayhew wrote that ‘there are – socially, morally, and perhaps even physically considered – but two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the wanderers and the settlers – the vagabond and the citizen – the nomadic and the civilized tribes’. For Mayhew itinerancy was an indelible mark of savagery that belonged not only to the unruly ‘habitual vagrant – half-beggar, half-thief’, but also to a broad class of ‘street-folk’, ‘the street-sellers – the street-performers – the cab-men – the coachmen – the watermen – the sailors’.²⁸ The testimonies of these people in *London Labour and the London Poor* contradicted this argument, often describing fixed homes and settled communities, and Mayhew’s own analysis of metropolitan poverty was often at variance with racial theory.²⁹ Nonetheless, despite his lack of ethnographic rigour, Mayhew’s equation of mobility and barbarism illustrates how easily vagrants might be ‘scientifically’ translated into savages.

The racialisation of vagrants was part of a much broader cultural programme in which the poor were interpreted in racial terms by journalists, scientists, novelists and politicians, among others. From the mid-nineteenth century social commentators began to explain the physical and social impacts of poverty in terms of heredity: precarious employment,

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poor hygiene, criminal actions, physical frailty and prostitution were increasingly (although not exclusively) imagined as biologically determined.³⁰ The racial construction of the poor as a separate and inherently dysfunctional segment of humanity reflected contemporary understandings of race. As Kenan Malik argues, for much of the Victorian period ‘race was a description of social distinctions, not colour differences’, and as such scientific racism was used to justify the social and material inequalities that existed in both Britain and the Empire.³¹ It was used to naturalise the rule of capitalists over labourers at home, and the rule of white colonists over black and indigenous populations abroad.³²

This is evident in the theory of degeneration. Like extinction theory, the theory of degeneration was not a coherent set of beliefs; it was an interpretive framework that was subject to change and reinvention. During the last decades of the Victorian period it was deeply influenced by social Darwinists, who applied the theory of evolution by natural selection to human societies. They argued that while the ‘primitive’ peoples of the Empire embodied a degraded form of the ideal white race, the vitality of that same race was being threatened by the rapid reproduction of the urban poor in Britain. This belief rested on the self-satisfied notion that Britain’s civilisation was so advanced that it had neutralised the process of natural selection and nullified Darwin’s formula of the ‘survival of the fittest’. In turn, this allowed the mentally, physically and morally ‘unfit’ to propagate without the hindrances that would have prohibited them from reproducing in a state of nature.³³ Imagined as ‘racially distinct and as causing the degeneration of the [Anglo-Saxon] race as a whole’, it was feared that this unfit class – which included the vagrant and unemployed – would eventually overwhelm the rest of society, causing Britain and its Empire to crumble from within.³⁴ ‘Savages in Australia or North America might become extinct’, Patrick Brantlinger wryly observes, ‘But savage costermongers and paupers within the gates of civilization threatened to overrun it.’³⁵

Fears about degeneration sparked a series of interventionist schemes between 1880 and 1910. Coming from both liberals on the left and social imperialists on the right, many of these programmes advocated the creation of labour colonies that would ultimately eradicate the vagrant population. Although not all of the authors subscribed to racial explanations of poverty, social Darwinism was a prominent theme.³⁶ In ‘The Cult of Infirmary’ (1899), the imperialist and eugenicist Arnold White warned that ‘Our species is being propagated and continued increasingly from under-sized, street-bred people.’ His solution was a ‘process of sterilizing

unfitness and levelling up the national stamina', the first phase of which was the imprisonment of vagrants:

Consider the army of 26,000 tramps who infest the high roads of England, rob and rape when they dare, and use the casual wards as hotels. Extirpate them by immuring them for life, not because they are wicked, but because their stock is corrupt. Until we are content to see the idle perish, if they choose to perish, little change for the better in the health of the people can be looked for. If public opinion demands the maintenance of the idle poor, maintain them; but immure them.³⁷

Although this is a particularly toxic proposal, White was not alone. By the turn of the twentieth century many public intellectuals in Britain, including H. G. Wells, argued that incarcerating and/or sterilising the vagrant poor would bring moral and biological benefits to the nation. The same was also true in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 'Tramps frequently came up as examples of people who might be subjected to sterilization or segregation.'³⁸

The use of racial theories to define the vagrant body had a significant impact on their representation. The discourses of extinction, degeneration, eugenics and social Darwinism turned the vagrant from a curio of the street into a specimen – a sample whose behaviours could be generalised and stand in for those of a species. Gypsies, beachcombers, loafers and other vagrant types moved in specific ways, belonged to distinct topographies, and embodied different kinds of anxiety, threat and fascination. That said, the texts discussed below, most of them written for newspapers, periodicals or the popular market, rarely evince a thorough understanding of racial theory. As John Marriott warns while discussing the racialisation of the poor by Victorian journalists, '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.'³⁹ Moreover, although the definition of the vagrant poor was a preoccupation of the Victorians, it was also an ancient enterprise that carried the moral trappings of its medieval and early modern past. As a result, while the attitudes of some Victorian commentators were shaped by new racist discourses, others continued to be influenced by the framework of the deserving and the undeserving poor and by stereotypes that characterised the vagrant as idle, promiscuous, seditious and deceptive. These ideas continued to impact the representation of vagrants, and while sometimes they were intermixed with new scientific narratives, often they were not.

The structure of this book reflects the Victorians' taxonomic approach to vagrancy. It is divided into three topographical parts on the country, the

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city and the frontier, each of which contains two chapters that discuss the representation of one or more vagrant type. Part I, 'The Country', opens with 'Gypsies, Hawkers and Handicraft Tramps', a chapter that examines how aesthetic and cultural assumptions about the Gypsy 'race' impacted their portrayal between 1830 and 1860, and how this compared with other itinerants imagined in the same rural spaces. The second chapter focuses on the vagrant poacher and argues that this figure became politically loaded in both radical and conservative literature during the 1840s. Part II, 'The City', begins with a chapter on the reality and representation of the 'casual pauper' in the second half of the nineteenth century. Otherwise known as 'spike-rangers', casual paupers stayed in the casual or tramp ward of the workhouse and became emblematic of the difficulties involved in differentiating between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Chapter 4 focuses on the loafer in the 1880s and 1890s and the ways in which theories of degeneration, social Darwinism and eugenics influenced this vagrant's representation. Both of these chapters on urban vagrants also examine the strong associations between vagrancy and insurrection discussed earlier. Part III moves further afield, analysing vagrancy on the frontier. Chapter 5 addresses three vagrant types that were depicted by British writers travelling in antebellum America: the pauper immigrant fresh from Europe, the American Indian whose vagrancy was a sign of imminent extinction, and the vagabond who lived in the 'anarchic', outer territories of the Union. The final chapter examines the beachcombers of the Pacific Islands. These vagrant figures became particularly conspicuous in British print culture during the *fin de siècle* and served an important function in understanding and critiquing Britain's imperial actions in the Pacific.

The book's tripartite structure brings into contact two regions that are familiar in vagrancy studies – the country and the city – and a less well-documented sphere, the frontier. This last part examines how discourses about vagrancy could circulate globally as well as locally, and responds to David Hitchcock's recent observation that 'a larger, transatlantic, history of vagrancy remains to be told... The history of vagrancy can and should be concretely linked to the wider history of empire.'⁴⁰ In the process, it identifies the frontier as a particularly fertile region in the British cultural imagination. Conceptualised as an ungoverned and peripheral space on the edge of civilisation, it was readily populated with vagabonds, a class that was strongly associated with lawlessness. Many of the territories that I discuss in North America and the Pacific Islands were not part of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. As a result, although these frontier spaces were being colonised through the process of white

settlement, and the seizure of land and resources that this often entailed, I have used ‘frontier’ as opposed to ‘colony’ to avoid confusion.

I have also used ‘frontier’ in preference to ‘contact zone’. This last term is favoured by Mary Louise Pratt because it prioritises ‘the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters’, whereas ‘frontier’ ‘is grounded within a European expansionist perspective’.⁴¹ The bias that Pratt draws attention to is important, illuminating the fact that frontiers are artificial and ideologically informed spaces. Nonetheless, in a study concerned with representation it is practical to maintain the expansionist perspective of the primary sources, especially given that the vagrants’ environment was integral to their depiction. In the same vein, I have used the terms ‘Gypsy’ and ‘American Indian’. These are contested terms among Romanies and indigenous Americans, respectively, and it is important to acknowledge that while some identify with them, others see them as alien labels forced upon them. They have been used in this study because they are the terms used in the primary sources. This book is chiefly concerned with the representation of vagrants and therefore preserves the nomenclature through which they were articulated and imagined. That said, in the case of indigenous Americans, I have used the names of specific nations where possible. In this, too, I follow the practice of Victorian commentators, some of whom were attentive to sociocultural differences.

The sources used in this study include literature, visual art and a large corpus of ephemeral texts. The chapters begin with a detailed cultural history of the vagrant type(s) under discussion which informs an analysis of their portrayal in popular culture and the periodical and newspaper press as well as canonical works. These works include George Borrow’s *Lavengro* (1851) in Chapter 1; Charles Dickens’s *The Chimes* (1844) and Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* (1848) in Chapter 2; H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) in Chapter 4; and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) in Chapter 6. Chapters 3 and 5 are more wide-ranging and survey the work of several major figures, including Dickens and Kingsley, Frances Trollope and Harriet Martineau, and the painter Luke Fildes. Analysing ephemeral and canonical texts alongside each other capitalises upon the different strengths that reside in these materials. Although canonical authors are valuable because their works often complicate and critique prevailing assumptions, an exclusive focus on these writers would misrepresent how vagrants were perceived: “‘great’ figures are often unrepresentative (or are only partly so) of the intellectual currents of any given historical epoch”, Duncan Bell observes.⁴² Ephemeral texts, meanwhile, provide a more