



# Of Street Piemen

*Henry Mayhew*

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...a good bit of spice to give the critlings a flavour, and plenty of treacle to make the mince-meat look rich'

Radical Victorian reformer Henry Mayhew walked the streets of London interviewing ordinary flower girls, market traders, piemen and costermongers to create the first ever work of mass social observation, and the ultimate account of urban life - including an extraordinary description of the city from a hot air balloon.

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Henry Mayhew (1812-1887)

Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor is available in Penguin Classics.

## Of Street Piemen Details

Date : Published February 26th 2015 by Penguin Classics

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Author : Henry Mayhew

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## From Reader Review Of Street Piemen for online ebook

### Darwin8u says

*"What would the poor do without the poor?"*

- Henry Mayhew, quoting a saying in 'Of Two Orphan Flower Girls'

**Vol 26** of my Penguin Little Black Classics Box Set is a selection of letters from 'London Labour and the London Poor.' Mayhew, one of the founders of Punch, was asked by the Morning Chronicle to write a series of letters for the paper on the lives and conditions of London's poor. Eventually these short reports were collected in 'London Labour and the London Poor'. This book collects several of Mayhew's stories of London's street sellers and the working poor and some of his later pieces collected in 'The Great World of London' with my individual star ratings for each 'letter':

1. Of Street Piemen (LL&LP) - ★★★★★
2. A Balloon Flight (GWoL) - ★★★
3. The London Street Markets on a Saturday Night (LL&LP) - ★★★★★
4. Of the 'Penny Gaff' (LL&LP) - ★★★★★
5. The Port of London (GWoL) - ★★
6. Of Two Orphan Flower Girls (LL&LP) - ★★★★★
7. A Train to Clapham Station (GWoL) - ★★
8. Of the Street-Sellers of Live Birds (LL&LP) - ★★★★★

My favorite pieces were ones from his 'London Labour and the London Poor' (LL&LP) work and my least favorite were from 'The Great World of London' (GWoL). He feels like one part Charles Dickens (who he worked with as an actor in one of Dickens plays), one part George Orwell, one part John McPhee (his sense of people and place), and one part Upton Sinclair (social focus on the working poor). Loved this book simply because it was a great discovery of a great writer I knew NOTHING about before.

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### Chris Baker says

Beautifully written observations of mid-19th century London, brought to raucous and tender life with the voices of its tradesmen and poorer inhabitants. I might not have picked up a whole tome of Mayhew's writings, but the Little Black Classic format allowed me to enjoy these few glimpses into London's past without commitment. They certainly whet my appetite.

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### Prema Arasu says

This is pretty much Humans of New York but for Victorian London. Mayhew interviews and extensively quotes the working class of London including flower-girls, pie sellers and penny-gaff actors. He does not romanticise their lives nor does he reduce individuals to character tropes. Realism is a priority - his representation of London and its people as a whole is positive but it is not a utopia of freedom and wealth.

To a non-English person like me (I live in the colonies) this was a particularly valuable text as I'd otherwise tend to think of Victorian England as a magical place in time with fashionable corseted ladies and dashing street urchin-rakes.

This publication rather usefully provides extensive context as these articles were written with a political agenda; Mayhew was a liberal. His writings aimed to humanise the working class. Eventually he became a writer/editor of the magazine *Punch* which was the first publication to use emoticons.

Political context aside, *The Port of London* can be read for literary enjoyment alone. Mayhew writes beautifully with a sense of fondness for his city and all of its quirks. The port itself is a physical representation of the industrial revolution and economic success of England. He describes things on all scales, the large, the small, and all of the sights, sounds and scents of the port.

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### **Peter says**

This was an interesting look at London as it really was no colouring was evident. Being a Londoner, what thrilled me was the pleasure of visualising many of the places and how they look today, magnificent!

Really looking forward to exploring more of Henry Mayhew's work. It's a great shame that people who gave it one star may not have understood where this is coming from, but I guess you need to be from London to fully appreciate its nuances.

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### **Katie Lumsden says**

An interesting little collection of essays. I must read more Henry Mayhew in the future.

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### **Lea says**

This was a nice surprise. It's not fiction and if you are not interested in the real lives of London Victorian lives, then this is not for you. But I found it engaging and it really conjured up the images of the time for me as well as being historically interesting.

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### **Bookdragon Sean says**

The chronicles in this edition do help to create an image of Victorian London, and it is perhaps an image you would not normally perceive. It's about the little things like Pie sellers and girls selling flowers. However, these things aren't very interesting to read about. An edition like this, I should imagine, would be helpful to someone writing a novel in the Victorian era or perhaps shooting a film. It does provide insight into some of the less glamourous aspects of London life. That being said though, for most people, including myself, this is a chronicling of some very mundane things.

### **Pointless knowledge**

Indeed, very few people want to, or need to, learn about the type of pies sold in the street of London. It's just not a very though provoking topic. This is not the kind of thing one picks up for leisure, but only on the purpose of acquiring, some rather useless, information on the Victorian era. I don't recommend this; I think it's one of the worse things that has been stuck in this collection.

Penguin Little Black Classic- 26

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The Little Black Classic Collection by penguin looks like it contains lots of hidden gems. I couldn't help it; they looked so good that I went and bought them all. I shall post a short review after reading each one. No doubt it will take me several months to get through all of them! Hopefully I will find some classic authors, from across the ages, that I may not have come across had I not bought this collection.

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### **Marjolein says**

Full review to come!

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### **Russio says**

At times this evocative reportage from the streets of Victorian Britain feels so close you can taste its briny foulness and glory in its teeming vitality. Mayhew was clearly a left-leaning man, very much after my own heart, as the biographical notes reveal and these segments come from two larger texts: one, a 700 page tome about London's inhabitants, from which the best of these are drawn. The fantastic closing sentence of "Penny Gaff" made me laugh out loud on the tube (where else would one gulp down this delicious treat?), revealing as it did, a real talent for the observation of the appalled. Similarly, his rhetorical question "What would the poor do without the poor?" has great resonance, even in these times. His conclusion on a family of street orphans "Neither of them ever missed mass on a Sunday," shows a lionising of the working classes that is frankly admirable. We need more of this journalism today, rather than the tawdry anti-benefits/lowest common denominator pandering of the gutter press (by which I mean nearly all of it). This is an out and out celebration of a disappearing London and one that is to be held in the highest esteem. Its truths are no doubt applicable to many other big cities across the developed world, but the things that make it uniquely London shine out too. The city felt warmer today for treading the same streets as these forebears had done. Mayhew's selection was that of a gentleman.

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### **Linda says**

something completely different from what I normally read. it's just a little insight of Victorian London and it's people and I thoroughly enjoyed it. a simple little black classic that can be enjoyed with nice hot cup of tea!

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## Daren says

This is a great little collection of excerpts. They are from two large sources - the 3 (or 4?) volume *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851 and *The Great World of London* 1856.

The chapters cover elements of street life in Victorian London - piemen, street markets, flower girls, bird sellers, and more. The writing is fantastic - so atmospheric and excellently descriptive - examples

*Some stalls are crimson with the fire shining through the holes beneath the baked-chestnut stove, others have handsome octahedral lamps, while a few have a candle shining through a sieve; these, with the sparkling ground-glass globes of the tea-dealers' shops, and butchers gaslights streaming and fluttering in the wind, like flags of flame, pour forth such a flood of light, that at a distance the atmosphere immediately above the spot is as lurid as if the pavement were on fire.* P12.

As one other reviewer pointed out, this is the only Little Black Classic I have found that has an extensive Source section at the end, giving good detail in where the excerpts came from.

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## JK says

Mayhew writes passionately of his Victorian London, throwing off the stereotypes, and presenting us with a realistic picture of the poor, their daily lives and struggles, and their entertainment in the penny gaffs.

As someone who is generally fascinated by books detailing this era, Mayhew's descriptions were valuable and interesting to me, despite being dull to some. The price of street pies, the methods of catching and selling birds, the profits made by such endeavours, and the ways in which these profits were spent on necessity or pleasure, all delighted and enthralled me. They showed me the real Victorian London, and helped dissolve any preconceived fantasies.

It's clear Mayhew had sympathy for the lower classes, and had aims to highlight their struggles through his work as a journalist. Compare that to how the poor are depicted in our media today, and it seems we've gone backwards rather than forwards in the past 150 years or so. It's a sad thing to contemplate, but definitely something to hold on to.

The atmosphere Mayhew weaves into his observations creates a real gloom to London, but a gloom with a certain purpose. Although his accounts of the people were relished more by me, his detailed explanations of the city's aesthetic, whether from a fast train, a high balcony, or a soaring hot air balloon, were completely gorgeous in their originality.

I'm no Londoner, but I can only imagine the joy I would feel had Mayhew written of the streets I travel on every day, and imagining them bustling with the street markets, flower girls, and pie sellers of the era.

A truly gorgeous collection written with a keen fondness for his city; this was my first foray into Mayhew, but I'll definitely be picking some more up as soon as I can.

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## Maud says

There are 8 stories in this little book and I only liked 2 of those (Of Street Pieman & Of Two Orphan Flower Girls). All the other ones felt slow, boring and sometimes even offensive in a way. I don't think I will be

picking up anymore work by this author, this was quite enough for me.

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### **Joey Woolfardis says**

Henry Mayhew was an English Victorian journalist and playwright who actively sought to create an equality amongst the inhabitants of England and a London. Of Street Piemen contains extracts from his book series of newspaper articles London Labour and the London Poor.

This is an invaluable resource in to the poor of London in the Victorian times. It contains first-hand accounts from those who lived and worked in the city, including some lesser-known occupations such as live bird catchers and sellers. It's quite surprising at times and his journalistic writing style gives the writing a tone that is both educational and agreeable. This LBC also features something which none of the previous ones have, and that's a source guide at the back (none feature introductions or footnotes at all) which gives details of where the extracts come from in relation to his other work.

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### **royaevereads says**

This was beautiful!! Short descriptions of the people and places of mid 1800s London. This is an absolute favourite time period of mine so reading a text like this was a delight. Mayhew has such an artful way of describing places, and a particular talent for presenting people. He captures beauty in all the little details.

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