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THE GYPSY PROBLEM IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND*

COMPARATIVELY FEW PEOPLE ROAMED THE VICTORIAN COUNTRYSIDE SIMPLY for the sake of movement. Still, the "wandering tribes," as Henry Mayhew called them, did contain those who steadfastly refused to settle anywhere. Whether raised as professional beggars or, like the old soldiers without peacetime skills, convinced that the labor market had no place for them, these hardcore vagrants packed the casual wards of workhouses. Rate-payers naturally resented them as economic dead-weight. As individuals who would not be deterred by the workhouse regimen from pursuing a free course, they were also feared. After all, habitual vagrants called no one master and could afford to ignore the work-discipline of industrial capitalism. A common assumption of the governing classes was that every worker harbored latent impulses toward wandering, and thus any contact between intractable vagrants and respectable workers posed the danger that these impulses might be activated.[1] The genteel Victorians who worried about the lure of the roving life were not, however, dealing entirely in abstractions. For among the wanderers moved an intriguing people who from time out of mind had flouted convention: "A race that lives on prey as foxes do with stealthy, petty rapine."[2] These were the Gypsies, and their presence in England struck some reformers as an intolerable affront to the values of modern civilization.

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[1] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (1861-1862; rpt. ed., New York: Dover, 1968), I, 2-3; Raphael Samuel, "Comers and Goers," in *The Victorian City*, eds. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1976), I, 124, 152-153; Rachel Vorspan, "Vagrancy and the New Poor Law in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England," *English Historical Review*, 92 (January 1977), 73; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (London: Penguin, 1971), pp. 88-90.

[2] George Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy* (New York: John Lovell, 1868), p. 90.

Yet precisely because the Gypsies stood apart from the mainstream of urban-industrial life, they held a special fascination for the critics of that life. What appeared to be a characteristic restlessness among Gypsies therefore evoked both romantic praise and systematic harassment during the last third of the nineteenth century. The essay that follows will examine the articulation of these conflicting views of Gypsy culture. Oddly enough, the chief critics as well as the defenders of Gypsy habits considered themselves patrons of what they labelled variously a "race," a "tribe," a "caste," and a "people." This essay will accordingly focus on the form and content of such patronage, rather than on the often unwilling objects of attention. As was true of many Victorian social issues, the essential Gypsy "problem" lay in the solution, or rather solutions, proposed for treating a deviant population.

I

Because Gypsies were among the most self-sufficient of wanderers, they posed a vexing problem for local authorities bent on applying uniform sanctions against vagrancy. To enforce a coherent vagrant policy, it would have been necessary for magistrates and Poor Law guardians to know the size of England's migratory population and the patterns of its movement, as well as to possess an unambiguous legal code. In fact, local authorities enjoyed none of these advantages. The legal basis for prosecuting tramps was the Vagrant Act of 1824, a landmark statute designed to uphold the ideals of self-help, regular work, and family responsibility. Although the Vagrant Act gave law enforcement officials broad discretionary powers, it also saddled them with a heavy burden of proof. Thus, at the end of the century, a frustrated Oxfordshire magistrate wrote to the Home Office complaining that under the Act he had to demonstrate three things: that the accused had been lodging in a barn, outhouse, or other unsuitable shelter; that he had no visible means of support; and that he could not give a "good account" of himself. But what were Justices of the Peace to do, the writer asked rhetorically, when a tramp was found in an outhouse with a few pence in his pocket?[3]

Sometimes shielded by the law, Victorian "travellers" were also part of a shifting population whose contours left a society enamoured

[3] David Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 198-199. Public Record Office (hereafter, *PRO*), Home Office (H.O.) 45, 9985/X64305, letter dated 10 May 1897. The 1824 Act (5 Geo. 4, c. 83) declared it illegal to "wander abroad and lodge in barns, tents, the open air, &c, not having visible means of subsistance and not giving a good account of one's self," and set a maximum penalty of three months in prison for conviction under the statute.

of statistical precision frankly baffled. In 1826 William Cobbett put the number of English "tramps and beggars" at 30,000. In 1909 the Salvation Army declared that the force of "homeless, wandering idlers living on the labour of others" was 60,000 strong and growing fast.[4] Uncertain as such estimates are, it is nonetheless worth noting that since the population of England and Wales roughly tripled over these eighty-three years, the oft-repeated warning of Victorian social critics that vagrancy was "on the rise" may have reflected heightened concern about the problem rather than demographic reality. But to reformers convinced that mendicancy was catching, the uncertain size of the migrant pool was itself a cause for alarm. Where there arose large discrepancies between Poor Law calculations (based on the number of paupers in workhouse casual wards) and police returns (which combined the populations of casual wards and common lodging houses with the number of persons found sleeping rough), few social critics stopped to note that the higher vagrancy figures were necessarily inflated due to their inclusion of honest folk searching for work.[5]

Although Gypsies rarely haunted either casual wards or common lodging houses, local authorities still tended to view them as part of the wider vagrant problem. In 1866 the Relieving Officer of Birkenhead explained to his superiors at the Poor Law Board that a partial list of vagrant trades would include:

> Thieves on the look out, low prostitutes, beggars of both sexes and all ages, hawkers of petty articles, such as watches, caps, laces, bead ornaments, steel pens, writing paper (or anything which will serve to approach a house, to find out what can be obtained by fair or foul means); and begging-letter writers, smashers [those who passed counterfeit coins], ballad singers, travelling tinkers, china menders, umbrella repairers.[6]

As hawkers of "petty" wares such as baskets and clothespins, Victorian Gypsies seemed to share that "instinctive aversion to what may be termed hard work" associated with hardcore vagrants. Worse yet, the champions of private property alleged, Gypsy baskets and clothespins were generally fashioned from stolen reeds and willow branches. Thus, when in 1889 a Hereford farmer chanced upon two Gypsy boys whom he suspected of pulling sticks from his hedge, he accused the youths of theft, only to be attacked for his effort. Although the farmer's story

[4] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 2 vols. (1853; rpt. ed., London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), II, 106; Bramwell Booth, et al., *The Vagrant and the Unemployable* (London: Salvation Army, 1909), pp. 6-7.

[5] T. W. Goodwyn, *Vagrants: Their Number, Gains, Habits, Haunts, and Requirements, Especially in Bristol* (Bristol: Morgan, 1869), pp. 5-6; Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, *Parliamentary Papers* (hereafter *PP*), 1870, XXXV, xxx-xxxi; W. H. Beveridge, *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry*, 2d ed. (London: Longmans, 1910), p. 48.

[6] As quoted in C. J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Beggars and Begging* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), p. 295.

rested on very thin evidence, each boy received a month with hard labor.[7] The presumption of Gypsy malice lingered partly because trials involving these "natural depredators" made good copy. The *Preston Guardian* gave close attention, for example, to the case of June Matilda Boswell, eighteen, a Gypsy fortune teller who had convinced a servant to hand over a dress, a silver ring, and two shillings as the price of warding off bad luck. The naiveté of the victim was apparently less remarkable than Boswell's deceit, an offense for which she had to pay two shillings, sixpence, plus costs.[8]

Whether Victorian Gypsies actually deserved their lawless reputation is difficult to judge, not least because contemporaries applied the label "Gypsy" so loosely. Only at the end of the century did government reports begin to divide the wandering population into classes. A study of habitual offenders published in 1895 noted, for example, that Gypsies differed from the "ordinary vagrant" in the high proportion of women and children to men found among the former.[9] Two generations earlier, such distinctions were rarely drawn. *The Times* was content to report in 1826 that "a gang of vagrants, calling themselves Gypsies," had wreaked vengeance on a Somerset farmer by kidnapping his son and gluing the poor lad's lips together with "bird lime."[10] Early Victorian accounts of Gypsy behavior tended, moreover, to be grossly inconsistent. Newspaper readers learned in October 1842 that the New Forest Gypsies were an honest lot who, in return for a little straw to cushion their beds, acted as farmers' watchdogs against poachers. Yet two months later, this same tribe stood accused of suffocating sheep by forcing wool down their throats.[11]

Though far from conclusive, the evidence contained in two autobiographies suggests that Gypsies were less wayward than their reputation indicated. Samuel Loveridge, born between 1807 and 1817, came from a horse-trading clan that had to fight to survive at West Country race meetings and "velgoroos" (fairs). The death of Loveridge's father when the boy was nine forced mother and son to sell everything and buy a horse-drawn van stocked with a "good supply of fancy baskets, feather-brushes, mats, brooms, etc." More sumptuous was the £300 van, trimmed with polished mahogany, in which an

[7] Henry Woodcock, *The Gipsies; Being a Brief Account of Their History, Origin, Capabilities, Manners and Customs* (London: William Lister, 1865), p. 42; *Hereford Times*, 11 May 1889.

[8] *Preston Guardian*, 15 March 1889; Ribton-Turner, p. 312.

[9] Report from the Departmental Committee on Habitual Offenders, Vagrants, Beggars, Inebriates, and Juvenile Delinquents (Scotland), *PP*, 1895, XXXVII, xxxi.

[10] *The Times*, 6 May 1826.

[11] *The Times*, 12 October 1842 and 14 November 1842.

uncle named Plato traveled from fair to fair. Here, clearly, were Gypsies whose well-being owed nothing to a confusion of *meum et tuam* (mine and thine).[12]

Rodney Smith, born near the Epping Forest in 1860, argued that while his people may have been "pilferers" of fruit and potatoes, they observed a strict moral code in other respects. Reflecting over a period of forty years, Smith could not recall knowing even one "fallen woman" in a Gypsy tent. Furthermore, his people "always" took care to christen their babies, and revered the old.[13] Smith's case can be corroborated with press accounts of stately funerals and shunning ceremonies in which Gypsy renegades were banished from their tribes.[14] But the suspicion of sin died hard. Throughout the Victorian era, most local authorities continued to view Gypsies as outlaws.

One practical consequence of this reputation for misconduct was harassment by rural police. George Borrow, in his semi-autobiographical *The Romany Rye* (1857), refers wistfully to the "old-fashioned good-tempered constables" who once walked country roads. Far from nostalgic, by contrast, is the tale that the period's best-known showman, "Lord" George Sanger, tells of a confrontation at the Mousley Races in 1836, at which Gypsy pugilists attacked an outnumbered constabulary with heavy wooden "livetts," driving them "streaming with blood" into a river.[15] The old rural police were not in fact as easygoing as Borrow implies, nor did Gypsy bands often risk armed confrontations with them. What cannot be doubted, however, is that England's new county constabularies launched a campaign against mendicancy in all its forms. In 1849 some county constables began to act as assistant relieving officers for the workhouse casual wards under the assumption that few able-bodied tramps would wish to suffer a policeman's scrutiny.[16] Later, during the 1860s and 1870s,

[12] *No. 747. Being the Autobiography of a Gipsy*, ed. F. W. Carew (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1891), pp. 2-3, 14-15, 25-28, 33-34.

[13] Rodney Smith, *Gipsy Smith. His Life and Work* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1901), pp. 17-18, 48-50.

[14] See *The Times*, 5 October 1842 and 18 October 1842.

[15] George Borrow, *The Romany Rye* (New York: Putnam's, 1905), p. 37; George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman* (New York: Dutton, 1926), pp. 85-88.

[16] First Report of the Select Committee on Police, *PP*, 1852-1853, XXXVI, questions 690, 693; Second Report of the Select Committee on Police, *PP*, 1852-1853, XXXVI, q. 3563. Despite early claims that this tactic had all but eliminated vagrants from some casual wards, police departments generally found the duty onerous and tried where possible to distance themselves from the workhouse operations. See the Second Annual Report of the Local Government Board, *PP*, 1873, XXIX, xxi. The Pauper Inmates Discharge and Regulation Act of 1871 (34 & 35 Vict., c. 108) theoretically made police assistance less vital by empowering workhouse masters to prescribe minimum lengths of residence and specific chores for those seeking shelter. In practice, however, variations between workhouses in the use of these powers meant that casuals sought out the least rule-bound wards. See Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History: Part II: The Last Hundred Years*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1929), I, 410-411.

police cooperated with local magistrates and the representatives of organized charity in establishing way-ticket systems whereby apparently "honest" wanderers received cards that entitled them to bread and shelter, without punitive labor.[17] But apart from diverting tramps into lightly patrolled counties, these expedients did nothing to halt vagrant traffic. Even the central government's plan to require licenses of all hawkers produced little besides angry letters from Midlands Members of Parliament who sprang to the defense of honest pedlars.[18] Frustrated, therefore, in their war on conventional vagrancy, rural police redoubled their efforts to drive all Gypsy tents off public land. The "black race" formed an underclass whose deliberate isolation made it an easy target for the agents of law and order.[19]

What scant sympathy Gypsies received before mid-century came from missionaries bent on converting them into sedentary Christians. The earliest and perhaps most broadminded of these missionaries was John Hoyland, a Northampton Quaker who undertook a national survey of the tribe. Contrary to received wisdom, Hoyland's survey, published in 1816, found that the Gypsies' wandering ways sprang not from any "contumacious opposition to judicial order," but rather from "a scrupulous regard to the Institutions of their ancestors." Yet the very independence that caused them to spurn Poor Law aid rendered adult Gypsies intractable nomads. Like the reformers who followed him, therefore, Hoyland gave first priority to saving children. If they could be induced to attend charity schools between the ages of six and fourteen, he hoped, these wild young might be rehabilitated as apprentices or domestic servants.[20] Also anticipating future reform effort, Hoyland discovered that a knowledge of Romany could work wonders. In 1815, armed with a phrase book, he spoke halting Romany to a band of London Gypsies, "upon which they immediately exclaimed, the gentleman understands what we say; and they gave way to immoderate transports of joy, saying, they would tell him any thing he wished to know of them" (Hoyland, pp. 178-179). John Hoyland thus became England's

[17] The best known of the various county systems for repressing vagrancy were those of Dorset and Berkshire, established in 1870 and 1871, respectively. See Captain Amyatt Brown, *On the Suppression of Vagrancy and Indiscriminate Almsgiving* (London: Edward Stanford, 1872), pp. 3-4. The *Chester Courant* (23 October 1867) described professional tramps as "guerilla bands" that had to be "exterminated."

[18] See Joseph Chamberlain to Home Secretary Cross, 2 December 1876, *PRO*, H.O. 45, 9327/18422.

[19] First Report from the Select Committee on Police, *PP*, 1852-1853, XXXVI, qq. 183, 1774, 2375; Vernon S. Morwood, *Our Gipsies in City, Tent, and Van* (London: Sampson Low, 1885), p. 45; David Jones, "Rural Crime and Protest," in *The Victorian Countryside*, ed. G. E. Mingay, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), II, 568.

[20] John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gypsies* (York: William Alexander, 1816), pp. 233, 249-251.

first "Romany Rye," a title that literally translates as "Gypsy Gentleman," but that connotes a patron whose familiarity with and generosity to Gypsies has earned him an honored status among them. Flattered by the deference they received from these traditionally aloof people, the Ryes would conclude that language was the bridge between the roving and the settled life.

Hoyland's early Victorian heirs managed to prove that moral suasion was no more effective than legal coercion in civilizing the Gypsies. From 1829 until old age forced a halt to his work in 1847, the Reverend James Crabbe operated a well-known mission at Southampton. Here the New Forest Gypsies gathered to attend prayer meetings made palatable by roast beef and plum pudding. Although Crabbe's exotic ministry drew contributions from the well-to-do throughout Southern England, his harvest of perhaps sixty souls was pitiful.[21] The Wesleyan Crabbe nonetheless retained his faith that the Gypsies were fundamentally honest and, despite their resistance to The Word, chaste. "More sinned against than sinning," they were used to being treated as outcasts. It would thus take a change of heart on the part of Christian England — an outpouring of compassion such as that described in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, another missionary thought — to wear down Gypsy defensiveness.[22] Eventually, public opinion about Gypsydom would soften, but not because English society grew noticeably more accepting of its vagrant population.

II

It was the confluence of romantic philology and what has been termed "an emerging urban-centered ruralism"[23] that transformed the English Gypsy from social outcast into noble savage. This transformation of image had little to do with objective changes in Gypsy culture. Nor did rural magistrates and county police share the late Victorian admiration for Romany wiles. Indeed, even at the end of the century, constables courted trouble if they tried to meddle with Gypsies camped

[21] John Rudall, *A Memoir of the Rev. James Crabbe* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1854), p. 143; James Crabbe, *The Gipsies' Advocate*, 2d ed. (London, 1831), pp. 72-76; Thomas Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 104.

[22] Crabbe, *Gipsies' Advocate*, pp. 26, 31; *A Summary Account: Proceedings of a Provisional Committee at Southampton with a View to the Consideration and Improvement of the Condition of the Gipseys* (Southampton [1830?]), p. 4; Samuel Roberts, *The Gypsies: Their Origin, Continuance, and Destination*, 4th ed. (London: Longman, 1836), p. 75; Woodcock, *The Gipsies*, p. 135.

[23] Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 54.

near "rough" villages such as Headington in Oxfordshire.[24] The image of the free Gypsy had long fascinated romantic poets, but the broader significance of this image derives from what it revealed about bourgeois self-perception. As early as 1833, Bulwer Lytton was watching "the low and the mercantile creep over the national character." Lytton looked to moral philosophy "to keep alive the refining and unworldly springs of thought and action" amidst the frenzied pursuit of profit.[25] But to the bitter regret of such critics, mid-Victorian society grew ever more obsessed with getting and spending, and in its rush to build a "brick-and-mortar civilization"[26] began to lose touch with those rural values that constituted the core of Englishness.

What made country life seem all the more precious to city-bound readers and writers was their fear that it might be on the verge of extinction.[27] No doubt the prophets of rustic doom overstated their case. In 1896, for example, the van-dwelling Reverend J. H. Swinstead, who ministered to the travelling folk of south-central England, mourned the "bald truth" that fairs were fast dying out. Swinstead may have been right that fairs in his parish of the Salisbury Plain and the vales of Dorset were under attack, but elsewhere during the late Victorian era government officials as well as county police encouraged them as harmless recreation for the urban workers.[28] Unquestionably, however, the cheap trains that opened up both countryside and seashore to England's city poor were symptomatic of fundamental changes in transport that had undermined rural isolation. Railway-fed suburbanization was bad enough, argued the champions of a pristine countryside. But worse still (at least from the perspective of those who already owned a piece of the country) was the moral rot that accompanied exurbanization, that is, the building of rural havens for affluent

[24] Raphael Samuel, "Quarry Roughs," in his ed. of *Village Life and Labour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 151.

[25] William Howitt, *The Rural Life of England*, 2d ed. (London: Longman, Orme, 1840), pp. 166, 168; Edward Bulwer Lytton, *The Life, Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton*, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, 1883), I, 227-228.

[26] The phrase comes from Poet Laureate Alfred Austin's *The Garden That I Love* (1894), as quoted in Wiener, pp. 49-50.

[27] There is a large literature on late Victorian ruralism. In addition to chapter four of Wiener's *English Culture*, see especially W. J. Keith, *Richard Jefferies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965); Marryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977); and Fiona MacCarthy, *The Simple Life: C.R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[28] J. Howard Swinstead, *A Parish on Wheels*, 2d ed. (London: Gardner, Darton, 1897), p. 40; Hugh Cunningham, "The Metropolitan Fairs: A Case Study in the Social Control of Leisure," in *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain*, ed. A. P. Donajgrodzki (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 179-180.

commuters. George Sturt, the Edwardian chronicler of village life, insisted that the enclosure of commons land at mid-century had not only allowed urban businessmen to colonize previously unspoiled hamlets, but also threw the long-time residents of those hamlets into a new and altogether less admirable world. So long as peasants had access to commons land for the fattening of animals, the gathering of wood, the cutting of turf, and sundry other arts of "cottage economy," they could, Sturt wrote, eke out a wonderfully self-sufficient existence. Once cut off from this key resource, though, the cottager "as a peasant . . . was a broken man."[29]

Confronted with what seemed to be the enfeeblement of a tough, independent peasantry, the city-based lovers of country life turned to that last bastion of rural resourcefulness, Gypsydom. By looks as well as temperament a foreign people, the Gypsies would not do as models of English racial virtue. But they could serve as representatives of the hardy competence associated with "true" country folk. Once mid-Victorian cultural critics began insisting that prosperity had been won at the cost of physical languor and a slavish regard for the norms of polite society, Gypsy waywardness could be seen as a virtue rather than a vice. As the period's standard guide to Romany put it:

> Gypsies are the Arabs of pastoral England — the Bedouins of our commons and woodlands. In these days of material progress and much false refinement, they presented the singular spectacle of a race in our midst who regard with philosophical indifference the much-prized comforts of material civilization, and object to forego their simple life in close contact with Nature, in order to engage in the struggle after wealth and personal aggrandizement. These people, be it remembered, are not the outcasts of society; they voluntarily hold aloof from its crushing organization, and refuse to wear the bonds it imposes.[30]

One byproduct of this disdain for the "crushing organization" of urban-industrial life was an allegedly high standard of health. Forced each day to exercise the body as well as the mind, Gypsies were monuments to the Victorian ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body). Indeed, so salubrious did the wandering life appear that during the last two decades of the century, fresh-air-starved gentlemen began to hire or buy caravans in which they spent holidays on the road, "Romany-style."[31]

[29] Philip S. Bagwell, "The Decline of Rural Isolation," in *The Victorian Countryside*, I, 40; George Bourne [Sturt], *Change in the Village* (1912; rpt. ed., London: Duckworth, 1935), pp. 6-7, 130-133.

[30] B. C. Smart and H. T. Crofton, *The Dialect of the English Gypsies*, 2d ed. (London: Asher, 1875), pp. xvi-xvii.

[31] Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 33-34; C. H. Ward-Jackson and Denis Harvey, *The English Gypsy Caravan* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1972), pp. 44-46. For the political adaptation of caravaning, see M. K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 147-148.

Attached though the Gypsies were to their independence, it seemed unlikely that even they could resist the onslaught of urban civilization. Already by mid-century, small bands were finding city homes during the winter months. Ignoring the fact that English Gypsies had long followed circuits that touched both town and country, the champions of the race saw only cultural collapse ahead. "Our grandchildren will never see the Gipsy tent," lamented one writer. "In these times, when the 'world is too much with us,' we can turn our thoughts to the careless rovers who have no care about getting or spending, who live for the day, and perish like the leaves; but in what vague envy will posterity take refuge?"[32]

Convinced that they were witnessing a dying way of life, the scholars of Gypsy culture who appeared in the 1870s did much to make the fate of the race a public issue. It was George Borrow who both launched the cult of the Gypsy expert and served as chief target for the philologists who superseded him. When his picaresque masterwork *Lavengro* appeared in 1851, Borrow's audience was unprepared for this disjointed "epic of ale" that glorified virile country folk — boxers, horse-traders, jockeys, as well as Gypsies — and assailed the "gentility nonsense of the time." As one of the book's few favorable reviews observed, "The public had been looking for a second Marco Polo and were presented instead with a nineteenth century De Foe."[33] Yet Borrow's eye (and ear) for the minutiae of mid-Victorian road life lent such authenticity to *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye* that these works helped form the canon of rural nostalgia. Like Thomas Hardy's Wessex peasants, Borrow's Norfolk Gypsies seemed to speak real jargon. Readers of *The Romany Rye* could savor whole ballads sung in exotic slang. "Drabbing the Baulo," for instance, explained how by poisoning a farmer's pig one Gypsy band earned a feast:

The baulo in the rarde mers;	The pig in the night-time dies;
We mang him on the saulo,	We beg him in the morning,
And rig to the tan the baulo.	And carry the pig to the camp.

A thorough washing of the beast's stomach completed this artful larceny.[34]

The philologists who would later form the Gypsy Lore Society in 1888 applauded Borrow's love for "everything which was of the open

[32] Anne Beale, "Among the Gypsies," *Sunday Magazine* (1875-1876), p. 49; Samuel, "Comers and Goers," p. 130; W. B., "Gipsies and Their Friends," *Temple Bar*, 47 (May-August 1876), 76.

[33] *Dictionary of National Biography*, 869-870; William I. Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1899), II, 35.

[34] William J. Hyde, "Hardy's View of Realism: A Key to the Rustic Characters," *Victorian Studies*, 2 (September 1958), 57-58; Borrow, *The Romany Rye*, pp. 41-42.

air and freshly beautiful."[35] But they could not forgive his sins against Romany. *Romano Lavo-Lil*, Borrow's Gypsy vocabulary published in 1874, was both thin and shot through with "absolutely ludicrous" errors in etymology (*Athenaeum* [25 April 1874], pp. 556-557). Far more reliable as an introduction to the tongue was Charles Godfrey Leland's *The English Gypsies* (1873). A literary polymath who had left Philadelphia for England in 1869, Leland typified the new generation of Ryes whose passion for the race was recast as scholarship. "If an enterprising traveller gets starved to death in Australia, or frozen-up at the North Pole, or eaten by the natives in Central Africa," sneered *Blackwood's* in 1866, "at least he reaps the glory of the venture. But to penetrate into Gypsydom . . . implies going through a great many disagreeable things, and offers no sort of honour or credit by way of reward." For Leland and his fellow enthusiasts, however, the promise of decoding a secret language and through it revealing the social organization of a vanishing breed was reward enough. Besides, unlike a rare mollusc or an old manuscript, the Gypsy could not be carted home for analysis. That he had instead to be examined *in situ* made a necessity of pleasure, for the Ryes of late Victorian England relished that "mute sense of rural romance" which pervaded the Gypsy camp.[36]

Self-confessed romantics, Leland and his peers nonetheless regarded themselves as the elite of a scientific sub-specialty. The German linguist Rüdiger had proposed in 1782 that Romany was of Hindu origin. This view found favor throughout the nineteenth century, especially after Max Müller's work popularized the idea that south Asia was the home of a parent language, Aryan, from which most European tongues had evolved. It was therefore tragic that Romany, a language so closely akin to the mother Aryan, should in England be fast degenerating into a travellers' *patois*. Although the Gypsiologists could not halt this corruption, they believed they could reconstruct the old language by chipping away pure grammatical forms from their jargon matrix.[37] Those of the race who spoke Romany often did so in an undertone if

[35] Charles Godfrey Leland, *Memoirs*, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1893), II, 301-302; *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (hereafter, *JGLS*), 3 (July 1891), 63; *Athenaeum* (25 March 1899), pp. 361-363.

[36] "Gipsies," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 99 (May 1866), 565; C. G. Leland, *The Gipsies* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882), pp. 13, 174-175. The death of his father left Leland independently wealthy at the age of forty-five, and freed him from his reponsibilities as managing editor of the *Philadelphia Press*. Before moving to England, where he learned Romany from an old woman camped near Brighton, Leland had earned wide notice both for his abolitionist journalism and for creating the *Hans Breitmann Ballads* (Leland, *Memoirs*, II, 262, 276-277).

[37] C. G. Leland, E. H. Palmer, and Janet Tuckey, *English-Gipsy Songs* (London, 1875), pp. 1-3; T. K. Penniman, *A Hundred Years of Anthropology*, 3d ed. (London: Duckworth, 1965), pp. 148-149; S. B. James, "English Gipsies," *Church of England Magazine*, 79 (6 October 1875), 226.

"Gaujos" (foreigners) were present. Bribes might not loosen lips. But by winning the confidence of Gypsy elders, out of whose mouths fell archaic terms which, "like the . . . mummified fragments of a Dodo, are the sole relics of extinct forms," progress was possible. As proof that patient research bore fruit, the Ryes noted Leland's exciting discovery of a hitherto-unknown language, Shelta (tinkers' talk), by questioning an itinerant knife-grinder near Bath.[38]

If there was general agreement about the Aryan roots of Romany, the related problems of Gypsy ethnicity and the chronology of their diaspora fueled much debate. Having been expelled from Spain in 1492, and soon thereafter from the German Empire and France, a tribe referred to as "Egyptianis" reached the British Isles no later than 1505.[39] Little else was certain, and amidst uncertainty speculation thrived. There was nothing to stop a student of rural life like Richard Jefferies from describing Gypsy culture as "older than the Chinese, . . . older than the Aztecs; [reaching] back to those dim Sanskrit times that seem like the clouds on the far horizon of human experience." Equally, there was room to wonder about the fate of the race since 1505; rumors of intermarriage encouraged attribution of Gypsy blood to famous English nomads from John Bunyan to Sir Richard Burton.[40] A Rye himself, Burton helped advance the view that Gypsies were related to the Jats of Northwest India, and had begun their epic migration during the tenth century. But what most intrigued the famous explorer were the parallels between Jews and Gypsies, the earth's eternal outcasts. Both races had been driven from their homelands; both remained culturally homogeneous, although widely scattered; and both seemed to draw strength from persecution. Yet Gypsy unity was all the more remarkable, Burton and his fellow scholars maintained, because it had been preserved without benefit of religion or wealth.[41]

Despite lingering doubts about tribal origins and pergrinations, then, all self-respecting Ryes held that on reaching British shores

[38] *Notes and Queries*, 6th ser., 9 (28 June 1884), 504; Smart and Crofton, *Dialect*, pp. viii-ix; *JGLS*, 3 (July 1891), 32, and 3 (April 1892), 195.

[39] "Origin and Wanderings of the Gypsies," *Edinburgh Review*, 148 (July 1878), 129; *JGLS*, 1 (July 1888), 6-9. Most modern scholars accept Northern India as the Gypsies' homeland, and believe that they originally existed as a loose federation of nomadic tribes. These tribes probably left India around 1000 A.D., although some evidence points to a much earlier exodus. Donald Kendrick and Grattan Paxon, *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 13-14; Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, *Gypsies of Britain* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1973), pp. 4-5.

[40] Richard Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow* (London: Longmans, 1889), p. 162; James Simson, *The Social Emancipation of the Gipsies* (New York, 1884), pp. 17-27.

[41] "The Origin of the Gipsies," *Saturday Review*, 48 (13 December 1879), 718-719; Richard F. Burton, *The Jew, the Gypsy and El Islam* (London, 1898), pp. 133-134, 161. On the comparison of "Israelites" and "Egyptians," see also Samuel Roberts, *The Gypsies*, pp. 168-169, 186; and J. C. H., "Who Are the Zincali, or Gipsies?" *Dublin University Magazine*, 76 (September 1870), 315-319.

the race was still largely pure-blooded. To attack this tenet, as John Crawfurd, President of the Ethnological Society, did in 1863, was heretical.[42] For unlike the ethnologists, anthropologists, and folklorists who filled journals devoted to their new specialties in the 1860s and 1870s, the Gypsiologists were less concerned with constructing a science of human society than with promoting study of one "primitive" people. This is not to say that the Ryes ignored theoretical issues. On the contrary, Leland and Francis Hindes Groome, the encyclopedist, made much of the theory that the Gypsies were "colporteurs" of magical beliefs. The colporteur notion was diffusionism run wild. It postulated that on leaving India, the Gypsies carried with them scores of Indian folktales, and that during their odyssey through Persia, Armenia, the Balkan Peninsula, to western Europe and the Americas, they had deposited these folktales with local populations, all the while adding new legends to the corpus. Thus, for example, both European witchcraft beliefs and the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm allegedly owed much to Gypsy fertilization of folk culture. These theoretical matters, however, interested the Ryes only insofar as they enhanced the uniqueness of the race.[43]

Gypsiology combined an antiquarian fussiness rivaling that of the mid-Victorian ecclesiologists with the model-building zeal of late Victorian anthropology.[44] For inspiration, the Ryes drew from the same store of rural nostalgia that fed novelists and poets during the last three decades of the century. The leading Gypsy scholars predictably enjoyed warm relations with Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Bulwer Lytton, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Theodore Watts-Dunton.[45] Together, the Ryes and their literary friends generated "a very craze for the Gypsy" that had no European equivalent save perhaps for the celebration of Provençal culture in France. This parallel is noteworthy. The Félibrige, a society for the propagation of Provençal founded in 1854, asserted the cultural independence of southeastern France by tracing its links to the Arab rather than to the

[42] "A Famous Gipsy King," *Spectator* (2 August 1890), p. 153; John Crawfurd, "On the Origin of the Gypsies," *Anthropological Review*, 1 (November 1863), 446-447; Richard Charnock, "On the Origin of the Gypsies," *Anthropological Review*, 12 (January 1866), 90-91, 96.

[43] E. Sidney Hartland, "The Science of Folk-Lore," *Folk-Lore Journal*, 3 (April-June 1885), 116-117; Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 270-273; F. H. Groome, *Gypsy Folk-Tales* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1899), p. lxiii; C. G. Leland, *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling* (1891; rpt. ed., New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1962), pp. xxvi-xxxiii, 168-173.

[44] J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 160.

[45] Leland, *The Gypsies*, pp. 172-175; Edward Clodd, *Memories* (New York: Putnam's, 1916), pp. 215-216.

Roman world. Here the complex of European assumptions about Eastern civilization that Edward Said has labelled "Orientalism" served the cause of French regional pride. In Victorian England, the Ryes gave less thought to advancing regional loyalties than to advertising an oriental sub-culture. Still, both the Gypsiologists and the Félibres consciously enlisted stereotypes of the oriental character in order to promote their philological crusades.[46] Was it not somehow endearing that Gypsies, "like Orientals, set no store by strict veracity; indeed they decidedly appreciate an artistic lie"? Was not "duker'ing" (fortune-telling) a quaint variation on the oriental love of deception? (*JGLS*, n.s. 1 [1907-1908], 346). Did not such a beguiling race therefore merit close study?

III

If those who extolled Gypsy freedom formed a coterie of zealots, the organized opposition to this same freedom was even more ardent. Remarkably enough, the driving force behind all anti-Gypsy legislation from the late 1870s to the early 1890s consisted of one man, George Smith — or, as he preferred to call himself, George Smith of Coalville. Smith's career offers a striking example not only of moral reform fervor but also of the part that the humbly born played in attempting to improve their world. Sabbatarians leaned upon the long-established Lord's Day Observance Society; champions of sobriety found comfort in that "great Nasmyth's hammer," the United Kingdom Alliance; animal lovers gained political leverage through the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.[47] These, and in fact most moral reform groups, were controlled by upper-class or middle-class members. George Smith, the son of a Staffordshire brickmaker, stood alone.

According to his only biographer, Smith began life in a home of "great poverty" in 1831.[48] After two years at a village dame school, he began to work full-time in the local brickfields. By the age of nine, the

[46] Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *Charles Godfrey Leland*, 2 vols. (1906; rpt. ed., Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), II, 126-127; Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), II, 47-51; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 40-41, 51.

[47] Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class Expression Versus Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of 'Leisure,' " *History Workshop*, 4 (Autumn 1977), 162-163; H. E. Manning, *The Temperance Speeches of Cardinal Manning*, ed. C. Kegan Paul (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1894), p. 22.

[48] Edwin Hodder, *George Smith (of Coalville). The Story of an Enthusiast* (London: James Nisbet, 1896), p. 22. Hodder had access to Smith's diary, the location of which is now unknown.

boy was laboring thirteen hours a day, shuttling from yard to brickmaker's table with forty-pound slabs of clay on his head. That young Smith was not a typical child clay-hauler may be gathered from the fact that the money he earned while tending brick kilns at night went to pay for books and, when he could fit it in, night school. The first book Smith bought fell prey to a band of Gypsies as he nodded over the kilns one evening. This event, we are told, might have bred a lifelong grudge against the race; but instead, Smith would recall "only their houselessness, hopelessness, and utter wretchedness."[49] In light of what he later tried to do for them, English Gypsies might have had trouble distinguishing between Smith's enmity and his solicitude.

Edwin Hodder, the accomplished biographer of philanthropists such as the seventh Lord Shaftesbury, Samuel Morley, and John MacGregor, is at a loss to account for Smith's social conscience. Hodder notes that throughout Smith's youth, "the air was full of rumours concerning legislation in the interests of the poor," adding that although the boy "knew little of these things, . . . the spirit that was animating them was in him" (Hodder, p. 32). What calls for further analysis here is Smith's religious training. His father was a "steady-going," "God-fearing" man who became a local preacher in the Primitive Methodist chapel; his mother had been a singer in a Wesleyan choir for nine years prior to her marriage. George himself stayed active in the Primitive Methodist Sunday school at Tunstall from age four to twenty-three, first as a scholar and later as a teacher. James Obelkevich has characterized the years from 1820 to 1840 as the "heroic age of missionary expansion" among Primitive Methodists in mid-Lincolnshire. Members of the sect during its first generation were praised for their "pious walk in the world." Above all, these early Primitive Methodists, among whom farm laborers bulked larger than in any other religious group, prized "internal self-discipline, self-respect, and seriousness."[50] Seventy miles northeast of Smith's childhood home, the region that Obelkevich studied cannot be taken as representative of religious trends elsewhere. Still, the predominantly working-class composition of Primitive Methodism, along with the sect's stress upon productive and honorable labor, have been more widely noted.[51] Raised,

[49] *George Smith of Coalville: A Chapter in Philanthropy* (London: Haughton, 1880), pp. 2-3; Hodder, pp. 28-30.

[50] Hodder, pp. 18, 22, 26, 28; James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 220-221, 234-235, 247.

[51] Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 128, 141-142, 239; John Rule, "Methodism, Popular Beliefs and Village Culture in Cornwall, 1800-50," in *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. Robert D. Storch (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 50-51, 61.

therefore, in a faith that cherished regular, hard work and condemned its opposite, George Smith naturally found the Gypsy's hand-to-mouth lifestyle an abomination. The race would have to be saved from itself.

The human salvage work for which his name became known ultimately robbed Smith of material comfort. In early adulthood, prosperity and the dictates of conscience seemed compatible. Up to the age of forty-three, Smith somehow juggled his well-paying job as a brickyard manager with his battles to bring brickyard children under the Factory Acts and canal-boat people under the health and education codes.[52] But by 1874 his employers at the Whitworth Colliery Company — along with most of Coalville — had seen, heard, and read far too much of his hyperbolic crusading. Smith was sacked, and for the last two decades of his life he and his family had to subsist on irregular gifts from well-wishers. These gifts sometimes included handsome sums from the Royal Bounty Fund and the "George Smith Fund," established by the editor W. T. Stead. More often help arrived in the form of the odd five-pound note pressed into Smith's palm. Lacking financial security yet convinced that MPs could be trusted to legislate morality only if he was watching them, Smith used the British Museum as his London office and, occasionally, sought out the lions in Trafalgar Square for nighttime shelter. As a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* summed up matters in 1884, "So far the moral of George Smith's life seems to be that a poor man should never turn philanthropist."[53]

If the reformer's poverty aroused sympathy, his self-righteousness and contempt for compromise alienated many. Smith's flair for the melodramatic was infamous. Canal-boat children, he had assured the public, were "growing up in the cabins in the most heathenish ignorance and squalor, receiving the most cruel treatment from the boaters . . . thrashed, kicked and beaten with ropes, sticks and heavy-ironed boots, until many of the boys and girls became as stupid as the asses they drive."[54] Until Smith turned to the salvation of Gypsydom in 1879, such melodrama served him well. His wrenching letters to the press made sensational reading, bringing invitations to write for national journals, to deliver papers before the Social Science

[52] On the brickyard campaign, see Smith's *The Cry of the Children from the Brickyards of England*, 3d. ed. (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1871). For reform efforts directed at the "bargees," see Smith's *Canal Adventures by Moonlight* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881). A more reliable account of the latter agitation is contained in Harry Hanson, *The Canal Boatmen 1760-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

[53] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 November 1884 and 25 November 1884; *The Times*, 13 November 1884.

[54] George Smith, *Our Canal Population: A Cry from the Boat Cabins, with Remedy*, new ed. (London: Haughton [1878?]), pp. 15-16.

Association, and to consult with MPs over the drafting of remedial legislation. But in mounting a frontal assault on Gypsy ways, he was assaulting more than an itinerant underclass.

No one in the late Victorian period showed less regret over the supposed doom of the race. Smith's first book on the subject, *Gipsy Life* (1880), found little to praise about a people who were the "dregs and refuse" of ancient Indian society, and who now constituted "black spots upon our horizon."[55] Through a mash of hearsay and selective observation, Smith strained some arresting "facts." There were in Britain, he believed, 20,000 Gypsies, of whom 19,500 could not read a sentence. Worse, perhaps two-thirds of the Gypsies living as man and wife were actually unmarried. The remedy for these sins was a law that would compel registration of all tents and vans; segregate the sleeping quarters of sexes within them; oblige Gypsy children to attend school at least on a half-time basis; and empower inspectors to enter any "movable dwelling." Smith shrugged off newspaper editorials predicting that he would encounter violent opposition: "Frowns, dogs, sticks, stones, and oaths do not frighten me." Since his goal was to "elevate" the Gypsies "into respectable citizens of society," he felt sure that they would soon thank him for his labors.[56]

Smith's *Gipsy Life* predictably earned him no thanks from the Ryes. Declaring that his aim was not "to tickle the critical ears of ethnologists and philologists," he had gone on to plagiarize their work. As for the Gypsies themselves, at least a few of these "agents of hell," Groome caustically observed, were ready to throttle the Coalville zealot.[57] But by this time Smith's guided tours of Gypsy camps and reports on "picturesque human degradation" at racecourses had won over the press. Until his first Movable Dwellings Bill went before the House of Commons in 1884, Smith met no serious opposition. In fact, his second book on the subject, *I've Been a Gipsying or Rambles Among Gipsies and Their Children in Their Tents and Vans*, intrigued a growing audience with its tales about the godless folk who fed their children half-hatched blackbirds, abused their donkeys, and committed incest.[58] As the Gypsiologists pointed out, much of this was raw invention. Still,

[55] G. Smith, *Gipsy Life: Being an Account of Our Gipsies and Their Children. With suggestions for their improvement* (London: Haughton, 1880), pp. 4-6.

[56] Smith, *Gipsy Life*, pp. 45-46, 234-235, 265; *Standard*, 15 August 1879; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1879; *Aldershot Advertiser*, 13 September 1879.

[57] Smith, *Gipsy Life*, p. 8; F. H. Groome, "The English Gipsies," *Academy*, 18 (10 July 1880), 21-22; Groome, *In Gipsy Tents* (Edinburgh: William Nimmo, 1880), p. 224.

[58] *Weekly Times*, 26 October 1879, p. 7; "Gipsy Life Round London," *Illustrated London News*, 29 November 1879, p. 305; George Smith, *I've Been a Gipsying or Rambles Among Gipsies and Their Children in Their Tents and Vans* (London: Unwin, 1883), pp. 7, 35-36, 265.

it was titillating invention, and moreover, invention that sprang from undoubted purity of purpose.

That Smith's Movable Dwellings bill very nearly became law cannot be explained simply in terms of moral capital, however. The support he enjoyed from William Gladstone and Lord Shaftesbury was important but by no means central to his success. Smith's drastic plan to civilize English Gypsies earned substantial parliamentary backing because it chimed with three current concerns. First, in proposing to save Gypsy children from the "warping influence of a vagrant's life," his pet bill addressed the growing conviction among reformers that the state had a duty to enforce parental obligations and punish parental misconduct. Many of the MPs who hailed the founding of child protection agencies in Liverpool (1883) and London (1884) also welcomed Smith's legislation.[59]

Second, the idea of inspecting Gypsy tents and vans seemed a logical extension of contemporary efforts to improve working-class housing. Although the Royal Commission established in 1884 to study this matter focused on urban slums, it also heard testimony from those familiar with rural overcrowding. The Reverend John Young Stratton, a Kent clergyman and landowner, had for years fought to regulate living conditons among the estimated 24,000 hop-pickers who travelled from London to his county early each autumn. Thanks largely to the 1882 Fruit Pickers Act, Stratton explained, some progress had been made toward separating the sexes rather than allowing these rough poor to mingle in barns and hopper-houses.[60] But as George Smith maintained, absolutely no improvement could be expected in "van towns" until these havens of vice and dirt received legal attention. Because caravans and tents technically were not houses, their dwellers remained exempt from all sanitary inspection and thus were subject to the ravages of smallpox.[61] If left to itself, Gypsydom threatened the nation with disease.

A free gypsy population threatened, finally, to contaminate minds as well as bodies. Smith's crusade united the traditional anti-vagrant prejudice of rural magistrates and constabularies with a late

[59] G. Smith, *Gipsy Life*, p. 51; Samuel Smith, "Social Reform," *Nineteenth Century*, 13 (May 1883), 902. On the founding of child-protection societies, see G. K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), chaps. 3-4.

[60] Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, *PP*, 1884-1885, XXX, qq. 15,638-15,643, 15,669; Select Committee on Temporary Dwellings, *PP*, 1887, XIII, qq. 56, 61, 65.

[61] Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, qq. 14,028-14,033. The Act based on the Commission's Report (48 & 49 Vict., c. 72) empowered local sanitary authorities to compel the cleaning and painting of temporary dwellings judged to be health nuisances. "Clause nine" thus fell far short of Smith's proposal. See G. Smith, *A Lecture by George Smith . . . delivered before the Association of Public Sanitary Inspectors* (1888), pp. 78-79.

Victorian version of the fear that vagrancy was infectious. Due to the "tightness of townlife" and the ease with which van folk might escape rates and taxes, Smith warned, Her Majesty's subjects were increasingly taking to the road. "True" Gypsies were helping to promote "gipsy habits" in those without a trace of Romany blood. Even the cautious Sir Hugh Owen, Secretary to the Local Government Board, admitted that little was known about the wandering population save that it was supposedly growing.[62]

In view of the fit between Smith's mission and contemporary concerns, what should be surprising is not that this working-class crusader got so far, but that he failed. Between 1885 and 1894 supportive MPs introduced nine versions of his Movable Dwellings bill. Smith's support was, moreover, broadly based. At a time when the major parties were fighting over Irish affairs, his cure for Gypsy heathenism won backing from Conservatives, Gladstonian Liberals, Liberal Unionists, and Irish Nationalists. Ultimately, it was one MP, H. C. Stephens, the Conservative Member for Hornsey, whose incessant bill-blocking kept Smith's measure off the statute book. Occasionally, Stephens stated his objections. During debate on the 1889 version of the bill, for example, he predicted that the "intricate mass of regulations" would, if passed, hound "poor and feeble" travellers into leaving "a healthy, harmless country life" for the city slums.[63] More often, Stephens's obstruction carried no comment. Of course, to the former brickyard boy, such behavior seemed at best a crude effort "to stop the . . . progress of our nineteenth century civilization," and at worst a mark of godlessness.[64]

IV

George Smith was right to link Stephens's one-man opposition with a larger protest against state-built "civilization." For Stephens represented not only himself but also a lobby devoted to the protection of individual rights. Founded in 1882, the Liberty and Property Defence League (LPDL) held sacred the principles of free contracts, self-help, and laissez-faire economics. The League had been established in part to counteract the growing power of the Trades Union

[62] W. Maurice Adams, "The Wandering Tribes of Great Britain," *Cassell's Family Magazine*, 9 (November 1883), 731; Select Committee on Temporary Dwellings, *PP*, 1887, XIII, qq. 183, 235, 405, 527, 530.

[63] G. Smith, *A Lecture*, p. 79; *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series, vol. 338 (31 July 1889), cols. 1839-1841.

[64] G. Smith, *The Movable Dwellings Bill* (Rugby, 1893), n.p.

Congress; and just as the TUC served as a political umbrella for organized labor, so the LPDL aimed to coordinate the activity of threatened trade associations.[65] English Gypsies hardly constituted a trade association. But because Smith's plan for their salvation affected all those who lived in tents and vans, League strategists hit on the idea of molding a trade consciousness among the most prosperous class of travellers: the showmen.

This was shrewd strategy. After all, during the early phase of his campaign, Smith had lumped showmen and Gypsies into one undifferentiated mass, when in fact these groups shared little other than the same fairgrounds. For "Lord" George Sanger, who had risen from owner of a "smoking oyster" booth to circus impresario, the equation was degrading.[66] Thus, while H. C. Stephens stalled for time in the House, the LPDL apprised leading showmen of the danger to their trade. In 1891 the League's proselytizing yielded a United Kingdom Showmen and Van Dwellers' Protection Association.

Although Smith would persevere with his bill until 1894, the showmen's first meeting revealed the depth of their resentment. With H. C. Stephens presiding over a cheering crowd, Smith entered the Agricultural Hall, Islington. Cheers turned to howls. The audience became

> a pack of wolves [ready] to tear me limb from limb. They clambered over the benches to get at me, but instead . . . they almost rolled themselves into heaps. The reporters were white with fear, and the little chairman M.P., with his coloured boots and fashionable cuffs and collar, was almost scarred [*sic*] out of his senses. . . . The showmen and the van-dwellers wanted my head, but they could not . . . touch a hair of it, for God's hand was over me.
>
> (As quoted in Acton, *Gypsy Politics*, p. 119).

Following this angry demonstration in January 1891, the secular press turned against him, while the new Showmen's Association carried its case to fairgrounds throughout England.[67] Mercifully, perhaps, cancer put an end to Smith's work during the winter of 1895.

In what was meant as praise, Hodder suggests that if only Smith had not been "such a one-eyed and one-sided enthusiast," he "surely" would have won lasting fame (Hodder, p. 163). Yet it was just this

[65] *Self-Help v. State Help. The Liberty and Property Defence League: Its Origins, Objects, & Inaugural Meeting* (London: The League, 1882), pp. 8, 13; [LPDL] *Annual Report, 1893-94* (London: The League, 1894), p. 9; Norbert Soldon, "Laissez-Faire as Dogma: The Liberty and Property Defence League, 1882-1914," in *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, ed. Kenneth Brown (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 208, 213-214.

[66] Swinstead, *Parish on Wheels*, pp. 3-5; Sanger, *Seventy Years*, pp. 70, 82, 181-183.

[67] Hodder, pp. 208-210; [LPDL] *Annual Report, 1892-93* (London: The League, 1893), p. 51; *Liberty Review*, 2 December 1893, pp. 1-2.

blinkered enthusiasm that allowed Smith to attack the wealthy interests that had for so long profited from unregulated labor in brickfields and on the canals. Ironically, it was Smith's mission to moralize Gypsy life — a life with which capitalists were the least directly concerned — that produced his only legislative defeat. Unlike many working-class moral reformers active at the time, he did not have the advantage of trade union connections through which to enlist the help of other working men.[68] Operating alone, Smith had no choice but to shout.

And his voice could be harsh. Still, Smith's condemnation of Gypsy culture was no more myopic than the praise of the Ryes. Both the reformer and the philologists viewed Gypsies as wild animals. George Smith died trying to domesticate the race. The philologists wished to let the beast run wild. According to one of their learned admirers, the Gypsies possessed "the lawlessness, the abandonment, the natural physical grace in form and gesture, of animals."[69] To the philologists, Gypsy life offered clear proof that the animal in the human being was strong, and that English civilization had gone too far toward repressing healthy animal instincts. It was this image of the Gypsy as a creature of instinct that in turn encouraged writers to invest the race, especially the women, with magical powers. J. M. Barrie's *The Little Minister* (1891), for example, tells of a Gypsy girl whose midnight dance up Windyghoul lane seems at once angelic and satanic. Similarly, in Watts-Dunton's *Aylwin* (1898), Sinfi Lovell is an appealing young woman who nonetheless possesses "the real witch's eye, and can do you a mischief in a twink, if she likes." For sheer animal magnetism, no late Victorian Gypsy character could match D. H. Lawrence's dark-eyed pariah whose body exuded "a purity like a living sneer," but *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930) built on earlier treatments of the theme.[70]

When viewed as "natural nomads," then, English Gypsies became exceptions to rules designed for a settled population. Special pleading on behalf of the race did not necessarily spring from genuine admiration, however. Leland was sufficiently contemptuous of his

[68] See Joseph Arch (1826-1919), Henry Broadhurst (1840-1911), Thomas Burt (1837-1922), William Coote (1842-1919), William Crawford (1833-1890), George Howell (1833-1910), Joseph Leicester (1825-1903), and Benjamin Lucraft (1810-1897), all labor leaders who worked together to oppose the Contagious Diseases Acts. I owe these data to Professor Howard Malchow.

[69] Arthur Symons, "In Praise of Gypsies," *JGLS*, n.s. 1 (April 1908), 296.

[70] J. M. Barrie, *The Little Minister* (New York: J. H. Sears, 1923), p. 22; Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Aylwin* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1899), p. 129; D. H. Lawrence, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* (New York: Knopf, 1930), pp. 40-41.

much-studied friends that he paled at the thought of borrowing money from them: "To be considered with sincere sympathy, as an object of deserving charity, . . . and to be offered eleemosynary relief by a gypsy, was, indeed, touching the hard pan of humiliation."[71] Leland and his fellow Ryes who established the Gypsy Lore Society in 1888 were undeniably ethnocentric. Their mission aimed less at advancing Gypsy rights than at evaluating and publicizing the Gypsy contribution to European "Culturgeschichte." Perceiving their work as a kind of cultural archaeology, the Ryes were willing to consider all claims for Gypsy influence, from the assertion that the biblical three wise men were members of the race, to the suggestion that Shakespeare himself may have been a Romany Rye. The Gypsiologists could compile such lore without embarrassment, "For History, as it is now studied, is beginning, like Science, to find that elements, which were once utterly neglected as worthless, are of extreme value. We ourselves do not know the full value of what we have done — a century hence our *Journal* will give to investigators documents, the real use of which is as yet unknown to us."[72] An appreciation of the Gypsies' past was thus a cultural gift to future generations.

This conservationist impulse linked late Victorian Gypsiology with such apparently disparate causes as the revival of English folk music, the protection of ancient buildings, and the preservation of commons. Convinced that open spaces were vital as "lungs for the metropolis," middle-class activists founded the Commons Preservation Society in 1865. Eventually, in 1899, the CPS amalgamated with the National Footpath Preservation Society, thereby ensuring that both rural country and city commons would be guarded by a single conservationist lobby.[73] The rise of interest in collecting a national treasury of folk music began somewhat later, with the work of the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, Frank Kidson, and Lucy Broadwood culminating in the formation of the Folk-Song Society (1898). Those who were determined to record what Kidson called "the simple homely ditties . . . sung by the humbler classes," as well as the environmental activists, shared the Ryes' obsession with protecting the remnants of an allegedly pristine and harmonious peasant culture.[74] On this stage the Gypsy was

[71] R. A. Scott Macfie [Honorary Secretary of the Gypsy Lore Society] to Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone, 25 July 1908, *PRO*, H.O. 45, 10363/154821; Leland, *The Gypsies*, pp. 154-155.

[72] *JGLS*, 3 (October 1891), 96-98; *JGLS*, 3 (April 1892), 198.

[73] John Ranlett, " 'Checking Nature's Desecration': Late Victorian Environmental Organization," *Victorian Studies*, 26 (Winter 1983), 198-199, 203-205.

[74] James Reeves, *The Idiom of the People* (London: Heinemann, 1958), pp. 1-3; A. H. Fox Strangeways and Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 33-46; Dave Harker, "May Cecil Sharp Be Praised?" *History Workshop*, 14 (Autumn 1982), 55-57.

an endangered prop, valuable above all for the color he lent to shaded lanes and windswept heath. The notion of encouraging the Gypsies to speak for themselves was as foreign to the Ryes as tolerance of the wandering life was to George Smith. The reformer and the philologists held very different visions of progress, but both were ready to subordinate the welfare of the Gypsies to these visions.

Only in the late twentieth century have English Gypsies begun to fight their own political battles. Now more often scrap metal dealers than horse traders or fortune-tellers, they continue to be regarded as a "problem" population by local authorities. The latter, in turn, have called forth a Gypsy interest group reaction by restricting the number and quality of approved caravan sites. Not infrequently, the most hostile city councils have been Labour-controlled. Far from viewing Gypsies as fellow members of the working class, these councils persist in believing that residential proximity to nomads carries a threat of moral decay.[75] Like George Smith's, their conception of respectability is exceedingly narrow. To combat such narrow-mindedness, English Gypsies will need help from sympathetic groups within settled society, but never again can Gypsies afford to let their case be argued through a romantic haze.

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[75] John Cripps, *Accommodation for Gypsies* (London: H.M.S.O., 1977), p. 7; David Sibley, *Outsiders in Urban Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 11-12.