

**PICTURES FROM AN EXHIBITION:
THE GREAT EXHIBITION
IN HENRY MAYHEW’S NOVEL 1851**

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The paper discusses Henry Mayhew’s novel 1851: Or, the Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to ‘Enjoy Themselves,’ and to See the Great Exhibition. The novel, itself written in 1851, offers a valuable commentary on one of the most significant events in Victorian economic and social history. In particular, the paper explores the novel’s ambivalent attitudes to production and consumption and to the producing and the consuming classes, as well as the way these attitudes are created or sustained at the level of narrative structure.

Key words: Victorian literature, Henry Mayhew, the Great Exhibition, production and consumption

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations caused a media explosion. New periodicals appeared devoted specifically to the Exhibition, and already existing ones offered special editions and supplements, in addition to running regular columns on the event; various abridged versions of the massive official catalogue were published, as well as souvenir volumes and guidebooks to London and the Exhibition. These publications vied to report the many stages of the Exhibition’s organization, describe its 100,000 exhibits, and educate and instruct prospective visitors. Most of them were also lavishly illustrated. In addition, the Exhibition provoked an outpouring of literature – from the Poet Laureate’s “Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition” and Thackeray’s “May Day Ode,” through a host of humorous and satirical poems, to didactic poetry exhorting British children to be on their best behaviour during the Exhibition.¹

¹ For the profusion of Exhibition-related publications, see Cantor 2017, who identifies the major emphases and points of tension in the media coverage of the event, and

Literary tributes to the event extended to the genre of the novel as well – one of the most notable of those tributes was Henry Mayhew’s novel *1851: Or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family, Who Came Up to London to ‘Enjoy Themselves,’ and to See the Great Exhibition*. Mayhew’s comic novel, illustrated by George Cruikshank, first appeared in monthly instalments that ran from February to October 1851; later in the year, it was published in book form by both George Newbold and David Bogue. The original serial form allowed the novel to reflect the various stages of the Exhibition process as they happened: from the sense of anticipation pervading the country and the build-up of Exhibition fervour, through construction workers putting the finishing touches to the Crystal Palace and the opening ceremony, on to the introduction of the shilling days, the gradual dwindling of audiences, and, finally, to the closing of the Exhibition.

The very scope of the novel makes it particularly valuable as a response to the Exhibition, despite the novel’s uneven quality as literature. Unlike Mayhew’s signature work *London Labour and the London Poor*, however, his fiction – some of it written in collaboration with his brother Augustus – has received little critical attention. Because of its theme, *1851* has fared somewhat better than the other novels (Roddy et al. 2014: 487). Even so, critical discussion of the novel tends to be confined to fragmentary commentary within broader discussions of the Exhibition, such as those by Prasch 2008 or Message and Johnston 2008. Essays exclusively concerned with the novel – such as that by Mathieson 2020 – are rare.

While those texts treat *1851* primarily as a source of documentary detail, this paper proposes to focus on the novel’s attitudes: it will discuss the novel’s ambivalent stance on problems of production and consumption, on the producing and the consuming classes, and on the Great Exhibition itself. The paper will also specifically consider the novel’s narrative structure, through which much of this ambivalence is created or sustained.

In terms of narrative mode, this is a heterogeneous novel that combines narration with mock-demographic exposition, travelogue-like description of natural scenery, urban reportage, sociological reflection, etc. In terms of narrative structure, though the title claims the novel will revolve around one particular family’s experience of the Exhibition, and though the family are introduced as “the hero, the heroine, and herolets of

Fisher 2012, who focuses on the particular challenges the media faced. Brief comments on individual poems about the Exhibition can be found in Miller 1995 (62 – 63, 74, 78, 82, 83); Pearson 2001 (194 – 196); Catalan 2017 (214 – 215); Cantor 2017 (196); and Short 1966 (201).

the present story” (Mayhew 1851: 11), Mr and Mrs Sandboys and their son and daughter are, in fact, often relegated to the background – Mayhew creates a gallery of eccentric side characters that repeatedly eclipse the protagonists, and tells convoluted comic stories about them that are virtually unrelated to the protagonists’ story. The Sandboys are also sometimes eclipsed by the narrator himself, when he steps forward to offer extensive commentary or description. The heterogeneous narrative mode and the wandering narrative structure, both bearing signs of improvisation, were no doubt partly the result of the novel’s publication in serial form. In addition, Mayhew had undertaken far too many literary and journalistic projects at the time (Fisher 2012: 10), and the novel seems to have received less than its fair share of attention. Whatever the reasons for the novel’s taking the shape that it did, however, this shape has – as we will see – important implications for the ideology the novel comes to articulate.

The problem of production vs. consumption is raised early in the novel, as the author introduces us to the Sandboys’ native Cumberland. Mayhew extols the place’s great natural beauty, and describes it as “an earthly paradise” outside the circuit of (conspicuous) consumption – there are no bills there, no tradesmen, no discounters; and “no dinner-parties for the publication of plate” (Mayhew 1851: 4). He pokes fun at the urban dwellers’ view which reduces “our boasted civilization” to commerce and consumption – he mocks their dismay at finding people live where there are no shops; and he mocks the entries they make in the local inn’s visitors’ book, in which they barely mention the spectacular mountains that presumably drew them to Cumberland, but focus in “gross” detail on the food and drink they consumed at the inn (*ibid.*: 4, 10). In the novel’s essayistic middle chapters, too, Mayhew deconstructs the idea of the independent gentleman, showing how wretchedly dependent he is on others’ labour, and arguing that working for one’s bread is the true mark of nobility. Production is virtuous, Mayhew suggests, and mere consumption is idle and vain.

While he extols productive labour, however, Mayhew is amused by the inordinate pride which Mr and Mrs Sandboys take in their production. He describes as faintly ridiculous the way in which Mr Sandboys, a small sheep-farmer, has plastered his sitting-room walls with notices about the prizes his sheep have won, as well as his boast that “he grew the coat he had on his back” (*ibid.*: 11) – the very sign of self-sufficiency that should make him a true gentleman. Mrs Sandboys, in her turn, is proud of her expertise in making pastry and preserves. So passionate is she on the subject that she engages in a life-long feud with a neighbour who disagrees with her on a fine culinary point; and she declares she would rather die

than part with her best recipes. To Mayhew, such proprietorial pride in one's production is an aspect of the Sandboys' "circumscribed" minds (*ibid.*: 13), though the same pride would hardly be surprising in larger or better known producers. What makes the Sandboys' pride absurd is, it seems, the fact that Mr Sandboys' sheep have, after all, only been displayed at small local fairs, and the admiration Mrs Sandboys' confectionery has gained is, after all, only that of the neighbouring villages. The amusement with which Mayhew views his characters is thus at odds with the reverence he professes in the middle chapters for even the humblest workers, and with the admiration he voices for the miracle of even as simple a man-made object as a button.

Mayhew's attitude to conspicuous consumption and the culture of display is similarly ambivalent. On the one hand, for instance, he makes fun of the way the minor London character Mrs Quinine expensively constructs herself as the picture of a fashionable invalid and, later, a fashionable expectant mother. He also ridicules the "elegant and inert" upper-class "loungers" who go to the Great Exhibition "to be seen rather than to see" (*ibid.*: 160). At the same time, his narrative gaze reveals a profound fascination with the glittering array of exhibits in the Crystal Palace and the glittering collection of dignitaries gracing the opening ceremony. More importantly, he suggests that civilization is, indeed, founded on commerce and consumption. When the Sandboys initially refuse to join the general exodus towards London and the Exhibition – they are the only people in the area who remain behind – they lose all access to even the most basic goods and services. Soon enough, they find themselves without coal, candles, or soap; as a result of various mishaps, too, the Sandboys son is literally barefoot and Mr Sandboys is wearing rags. The family's resistance to the dubious civilization of the metropolis condemns them to near-savagery and destitution. Self-sufficiency is, then, an illusion. At best, the idea of self-sufficiency is the sign of a circumscribed mind; and Mayhew repeatedly suggests that the provincial Sandboys are in desperate need of education.²

Accordingly, when the family ultimately decide to go to London, much of the humour in the narrative is of an "innocents abroad" variety. (Mrs Sandboys' trip to a public bath and her disastrous struggle with the shower – a modern contraption completely unknown to her – is a good example.) Significantly, the greatest in the series of catastrophes that befall them result from their ineptitude in handling commercial transactions and

² Mayhew is much more unambivalently critical of consumerism in two slightly earlier novels he co-authored with his brother Augustus – see Dimitrova 2021.

commercial shows. Mrs Sandboys, for example, cannot resist a crafty flower-hawker's offer of a good bargain, giving him in exchange her husband's old trousers, which turn out to contain not only a sizable amount of money but also the couple's marriage certificate. As a result, Mr and Mrs Sandboys get impersonated by the hawker and his female associate; and, in some very unpleasant brushes with the law, are held accountable for the impostors' crimes and misdemeanours. In his turn, the Sandboys teenage son is so fascinated by a series of street shows that he follows the performers and ends up in one of London's seediest areas, where he is drugged and stripped. Here, it must be said, the narrator's tone is only partly that of amusement at provincial gullibility; sympathy and a genuine concern over the seamier sides of city commerce and spectacle – of which Mayhew's work on *London Labour and the London Poor* made him intimately aware – can also be clearly felt. In this respect too, then, the novel's message is ambiguous: provincial suspicion about the big city is narrow-minded and slightly absurd; the perils of city life are real enough and often grim.

These and similar experiences make up the malign side of the social education that, the opening chapters suggest, the Sandboys badly need. But the benign side of that education, promised by the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, never materializes. Though the narrative exposes the family to a multitude of city sights, it denies them access to the one most important show which London has to offer, and the one for which they have made the journey. As a result of a series of mishaps, the family's visit to the Crystal Palace is repeatedly deferred and only takes place at the very end of the last chapter. The reader has, of course, been waiting for this visit, curious to see what the Exhibition will look like through the eyes of the family, especially as the four characters are very different from each other in temperament and inclinations – a fact that promises a clash of perspectives at once instructive and entertaining. But when the Sandboys son and daughter finally get inside the Crystal Palace, this narrative event is presented in a markedly economical manner. The two paragraphs narrating the event give us no idea of what the characters actually see or how they respond to it. They focus, instead, on the daughter's clumsy courtship by another subsidiary character. Mrs Sandboys' visit to the Exhibition is reported even more cursorily: it is compressed to a mere "[she] had feasted her eyes on the banquet of the works of Industry of all nations" (Mayhew 1851: 241). As to Mr Sandboys, when he finally decides to make one last attempt at the Crystal Palace, he finds that the Exhibition has just closed down. After an earlier expectation that the family's visit to the Crystal Palace will mark the novel's climax, by this point the reader has already

come to suspect that the visit will never materialize, and has been anticipating a dramatic anticlimax. The hurried, sketchy report of the visits made by three of the family's members, however, feels like a sorry compromise. The novel concludes not with a bang, but a whimper.

If Mayhew thus robs his characters of their Great Exhibition, why does he do so? And what does he offer the reader instead?

The novel's middle chapters, which could have made up the narrative of the climactic visit, contain Mayhew's most extensive essayistic interlude, and the one which obscures his characters most effectively. The interlude is a eulogy to the Great Exhibition, marked by a profoundly ambivalent attitude to the producing classes. Though Mayhew praises the Exhibition for promoting "brotherly feeling" among all nations and classes, he perpetuates the distinction, and reinforces the hierarchy, between "men of mind" and "men of labour" (*ibid.*: 128, 129). If, like most writers on the Exhibition, he views the event as a celebration of the dignity of labour, he also presents that dignity not as an inherent property but as an accolade to be conferred from the outside – it is for the benevolent men of mind to "make gentlemen of our working men" (*ibid.*: 155). Likewise, while he acknowledges that the working men have superior power over the forces of nature, he also paradoxically believes that it is for the perspicacious men of mind to transform the stockbreeder into an "experimental physiologist," or to make the ploughman into an "artist" by instructing him in the "subtle laws and forces" involved in the cultivation of plants (*ibid.*: 131, 130).

Furthermore, Mayhew protests against the "sickly sentimentality" that marks much discourse on the labouring classes, and against the "angelizing or canonizing" of workers; but he resorts to similarly reductive stereotypes when he praises the English labourer's "simple sturdy honesty," or when he admires working-class visitors to the Exhibition for having "no air of display about them – no social falsity – all is the plain unvarnished truth" (*ibid.*: 154, 160). Besides idealizing the producing classes, Mayhew also exoticizes them – the shilling folk at the Crystal Palace, he says, make a "very picturesque" spectacle (*ibid.*: 159), and he proceeds to describe the clothing of the members of various trades with an ethnographer's eye for distinctive detail. Mayhew also falls into cliché in his treatment of the Sandboys family, whose rustic northernness he repeatedly emphasizes. Not only do the characters talk in their local dialect, but each of the novel's chapters is headed by an epigraph from a Northern ballad in even heavier dialect; and the most entertaining incident that takes place on the northerners' home turf – a disastrous pig-driving expedition – highlights the family's rusticity.

The peculiar middle-class blindness which leads Mayhew to believe the labouring classes need instruction from their social superiors if they are to refine their work into art is, perhaps, at its most striking in the following solemn pronouncement: “The Great Exhibition is a higher boon to labour than a general advance of wages. An increase of pay might have brought the working men a higher share of creature comforts, but high feeding, unfortunately, is not high thinking nor high feeling” (ibid.: 132). This expression of patronizing benevolence does not merely weaken the claims made for universal brotherhood, but, in its easy dismissal of “high feeding,” shows little understanding of the lives of the people the author supposedly champions. It thus runs counter to the depiction, in one of the novel’s early chapters, of life in a Manchester neighbourhood where a group of “grim, hollow-cheeked, and half-starved” handloom weavers “toil[...] away for a crust” (ibid.: 56). Mr Sandboys – whose Manchester detour on the way to London is the result of a narrative contrivance at least partly designed to expose the reader to such scenes – is quick to run away from this horror. When Mayhew makes his grand claim on high feeling and high feeding, he too seems to dismiss the scene he has constructed himself, choosing to reflect on the life of the working classes from within the enchanted luxurious space of the Crystal Palace.

The exigencies of serial publication, as Mayhew was writing his novel, were real enough, and so were the demands of the other projects he was working on. Pressed for time, he even recycled in the novel some of the material on the Exhibition he had already written for *The Edinburgh News and Literary Chronicle* (Fisher 2012: 11). But the paternalist attitudes articulated in the novel’s essayistic chapters suggest that the reason why the Sandboys do not quite make it to the Exhibition is not merely hurried, improvised writing. Though these simple folk are suited to generate humour of the uncouth-provincial-come-to-the-city variety, when it comes to the Great Exhibition itself, Mayhew appears to balk at the prospect of letting them loose in the Crystal Palace. The event seems too grand and momentous to entrust to the narrative vision of such flawed and limited characters. Were the Sandboys to be let inside the Palace, we might find them “munching” their thick sandwiches and looking at the exhibits “with their mouths agape,” like the real lower-class Exhibition-goers that Mayhew describes with condescending humour (Mayhew 1851: 160, 161). If it is for the genteel classes to confer value on labour and to determine the value of the Exhibition as a “huge academy for teaching the nobility of labour” (ibid.: 155), then it must be for them, too, to provide the true account of the event. For the fractured, jagged, heterogeneous perspective on the Exhibition

which the Sandboys family could offer, the narrator substitutes his own panoptic, polished, homogeneous account. Despite celebrating the Exhibition as a force of social cohesion, then, Mayhew himself practices narrative marginalization and exclusion. His narrative thus mirrors official Exhibition policies, which were marked by “residual distrust” for the working masses, whose participation in the event was encouraged only within certain carefully defined limits (Short 1966: 193 – 194).³

Even so, however, the polished vision of the Exhibition the novel offers does not remain quite unchallenged. Among the various shows the Sandboys are exposed to in London, the most striking is the old clothes exchange, where Mr Sandboys goes to retrieve the trousers that Mrs Sandboys has given to the flower-hawker. This large, bustling market is described at great length – again, Mayhew was drawing on his work on *London Labour and the London Poor* – and appears as the very obverse of the Crystal Palace. Its size and the scope of its activity are similarly impressive; the buyers and sellers make up a similarly picturesque multinational crowd; and the visitor’s physical senses are similarly overwhelmed. And just as the Great Exhibition is an unprecedented event, so is the exchange a place unique not only to London, but perhaps to “the entire world” (Mayhew 1851: 101). Instead of cutting-edge technology and luxury goods, however, the exchange deals in refuse; instead of the delicate perfume flowing from one of the Exhibition’s fountains, the exchange is permeated by a sour stench; and instead of their best finery, buyers and sellers alike wear their worst. The dazzling image of prosperity offered by the Great Exhibition is thus countered by an appalling image of privation; and the catalogue of luxury in the middle chapters is countered by a catalogue of rubbish and decay:

[A little farther away] was a woman done up in a coachman’s drab and many-caped box-coat, with a pair of men’s cloth boots on her feet, and her limp-looking straw-bonnet flattened down on her head, as if with repeated loads, while the ground near her was strewn with hareskins, some old and so stiff that they seemed frozen, and the fresher ones looking shiny and crimson as tinsel. Before [another seller] was a small mound of old cracked boots, dappled with specks of mildew – beside that one lay a hillock of washed-out light waistcoats, and yellow stays, and straw bonnets half in shreds. Farther on was a black-chinned and lantern-jawed bone-grubber, clad in dirty greasy rags, with his wallet emptied on the stones, and the bones and bits of old iron

³ On anxieties about workers’ involvement in the Exhibition and on workers’ limited representation in the Exhibition’s organization, see Short 1966; Miller 1995 (76 – 84); Morris 1970 (291 – 292, 295 – 296); Message, Johnston 2008 (36 – 37, 41 – 42).

and pieces of rags that he had gathered in his day's search, each sorted into different piles before him; and as he sat waiting anxiously for a purchaser, he chewed a piece of mouldy pie-crust, that he had picked up or had given him on his rounds...

(ibid.: 99)

The description of the old clothes exchange is divided from the description of the Crystal Palace by a single chapter, and casts a shadow that haunts the reader even among the most glittering sights of the Exhibition. Thus, even though the narrator does not trust his characters to reveal to the reader *their* Great Exhibition, he disturbs the vision of economic prosperity and social cohesion by juxtaposing it with a vision of privation and isolation. If the novel provides a feast, it also provides the ghost for the feast.

Mayhew's eclectic, heterogeneous novel is marked by inner conflict and tension, with one scene or narrative mode subverting another, with the fictional story sometimes confirming and sometimes contradicting the claims articulated in the essayistic chapters. Ideologically, the novel is a combination of deeply engrained middle-class bias and a dissatisfaction with certain middle-class attitudes. On balance, however, it seems fair to say that despite some qualms and reservations, Mayhew ultimately asserts the value of consumerism and the superiority of the consuming classes, whose mission it is to guide the producing classes and whose privilege it is to appreciate the products of their labour. Though published in the same year as *London Labour and the London Poor*, the novel thus already anticipates what one critic describes as Mayhew's later "betrayal" of the pressing questions underlying that work, and his move to a "more complacent" political standpoint (Douglas-Fairhurst, ed. 2010: xxxii – xxxiii). If, as the novel claims, the Great Exhibition is an academy, it is one designed above all for the education of the working classes; and Mayhew is happy to adopt the privileged role of educator.

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