

HOW IMMORAL WERE THE VICTORIANS? A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RECONSIDERATION¹

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OVER the past thirty seven years it has been clearly demonstrated by Professor Quinlan, Muriel Jeger, Professor Ford K. Brown and Ian Bradley that the repressive attitudes which are popularly labelled and widely condemned as "Victorian" stem from the Evangelical Revival, usually dated from 1787 to the 1830s, the age of William Wilberforce.² There is still, however, a good deal of confusion about who can be called a Victorian or about what attitudes can be called "Victorian". The adjective has been stretched to cover anything that happened between 1815 and 1914.³ In this essay it is intended to define "Victorian" fairly strictly as applying to the period of the Queen's reign (1837-1901). Attempts have been made to define these sixty years as two generations, as though practically everyone alive between 1837 and, say, 1867 disappeared quite rapidly between then and, say, 1871, leaving the stage set for the next thirty-year generation. One must, however, always remember that, given the lower expectation of life as compared with today, millions of the Queen's subjects in the United Kingdom lived out their whole lives knowing no other monarch, a monarch whose pervasive and powerful personality left its impress in a variety of ways, not only on the mental attitudes of the epoch, whether by attraction or repulsion, but also on the physical shape of things. Indeed, it might be argued that just as Marx, towards the end of his life,

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 9th November 1977.

² M. J. Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude: a history of English Manners, 1700-1830*, New York, 1941, repr. with new preface by the author, London, 1965; Muriel Jeger, *Before Victoria*, London 1956; F. K. Brown, *The Fathers of the Victorians*, Cambridge, 1960; and Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: the Evangelical Impact on the Victorians*, London, 1976.

³ G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1962), pp. 28-32. Cf. The Swedish "Oscarian" period, which covers the reign of King Oscar II (1872-1907).

declared that he was not a Marxist, in the sense understood by some of his disciples, Queen Victoria was not a Victorian, for she had passed her most formative years in the atmosphere of the Regency and the reigns of her two raffish uncles, George IV and William IV. This having been said, I would profoundly dissent with Professor Cominos's sociological concept of a Late Victorian "Respectable Social System prevailing in England between 1859 and 1895".¹ After all, this was the age of the great collectors of pornography—Milnes, Ashbee and Sir Stephen Gaselee—and the era of the "pretty horse-breakers" of Rotten Row. The passing of the Obscene Publications Act in 1857, provoked largely by the appearance in 1856 of a weekly penny scandal sheet called *Paul Pry* and the obscene publications sold in the Holywell Street area of London, was by 1868 described as a dead letter, as the profit on the sale of one publication at a guinea more than covered the cost of the police seizure of five others; the local purveyors of pornography had formed a ring to pay the fines of their prosecuted fellow-traders.²

Those of us who had the good fortune to be brought up by parents and other close relatives³ born in the early and late Victorian periods do not remember them as immoral, or even as excessively hypocritical, although they did sometimes appear to be unnecessarily strict about the permitted behaviour of their younger dependents. Yet, from the end of the First World War a stream of literature appeared in which the Victorians were described, derided and analysed as though they were steeped in immorality and hypocrisy. One of the earliest and most influential of these books was Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, first published in 1918. In particular the pen portrait of General Gordon, in Strachey's anxiety to discredit Victorian attitudes, credited the general with addiction to the vice of solitary over-

¹ P. T. Cominos, "Late Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System", *International Review of Social History*, viii (Amsterdam, 1963), 18-48, 116-250.

² Cyril Pearl, *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat* (London, 1955), p. 270.

³ For example, William Chaloner (1840-1921), the author's paternal grandfather, in whose house he was born and passed the first seven years of his life, does not seem either in recollection or in the light of later knowledge to have been the typical "Victorian" of literature.

indulgence in brandy drinking during the hardships of service in Equatorial Africa, an accusation which has since been shown to depend on very flimsy evidence.¹ When one considers this slur in the light of Strachey's unpleasant sexual habits and, indeed, of the characteristics of most of the Bloomsbury set, one is reminded of the remark made by William Wilde, Oscar Wilde's elder brother. When informed of the court charges made against Oscar, William, who was a confirmed drunkard, exclaimed: "At least my vice is respectable".

Lytton Strachey's work heralded a vogue for books setting forth the details of Victorian low life. These were made possible by the overwhelming mass of nineteenth-century printed material bequeathed to posterity, in quantity excelling that of all previous centuries.²

Literary interest in "low life"—and by "low life" is meant the doings of criminals, prostitutes, street hawkers and the submerged tenth, the "residuum" as the Victorians called them—did not of course begin with the nineteenth century, as Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders* (1721) and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill, or the Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749)³ bear witness. It seems true to say, however, that from the 1820s onwards there was a growing demand for, and therefore an increased output of, printed material of all kinds on low-life subjects, both authentic and fictional. That rather unpleasant Radical publisher Sir Richard Phillips (1767–1840), the "Victor Gollancz" of the post-Napoleonic period, told George Borrow in 1824 that although translations of the most celebrated works of Goethe into English were a drug on the market there was a strong demand for works bearing some such title as *Newgate Lives and Trials*. Phillips said to Borrow:

I have been considering the state of the market, sir, the book market, and I have come to the conclusion that, although you might be profitably employed upon

¹ L. Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London, Phoenix Library edn., 1928), p. 226; B. M. Allen, *Gordon and the Sudan* (London, 1931), pp. 82–101. Allen gives other examples of Strachey's mishandling of evidence.

² It is simply not true, as Cominos, following Humphrey House, suggests, that there is a scarcity of knowledge concerning sexual behaviour in Victorian England (Cominos, loc. cit. p. 18).

³ Boswell called it "that licentious and inflaming book".

evangelical novels, you would earn more money for me, sir, . . . by a compilation of Newgate lives and trials.¹

Phillips set Borrow to work with a promise of £50 for compiling six volumes, each of not less than one thousand pages, which were eventually published in 1825 as *Celebrated Trials and Remarkable Cases of Criminal Jurisprudence from the earliest records to the year 1825*.

What were the reasons for this upsurge in demand? First of all came the rapid advance in literacy from the 1780s onwards, so ably charted by Professor Webb,² long before the over-emphasized Education Act of 1870. Secondly came the fall in the price of paper between 1815 and 1860,³ coupled with improvements of many kinds in the speed of printing of newspapers, magazines, part-works and books, all in larger editions. In the case of books, too, there were improvements in the art of cheap binding.

The Royal Commissions and Select Committees of the 1830s and 1840s with their recorded questionings and descriptions of many humble people on social, industrial and sanitary matters—the first large-scale use of oral history—provided novelists and journalists with copious raw material of a lucid and often surprising character. For the early Victorians were, in the modern phrase, “a caring people”, intensely interested in social and statistical investigation.⁴ Disraeli, for example, took materials freely from the evidence presented to Royal Commissions and Select Committees in the 1840s and incorporated them into his novels (Willenhall became “Wodgate”), just as sixty years later Arnold Bennett lifted a long section from the Rev. Charles Shaw’s anonymous autobiography *When I was a Boy by an Old*

¹ G. Borrow, *Lavengro* (6th definitive edn., 1900; repr. 1911), p. 204.

² R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790–1848*, London, 1955.

³ D. C. Coleman, *The British Paper Industry 1495–1860* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 203, 289.

⁴ T. S. Ashton, *Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester, 1833–1933*, London, 1933; M. J. Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain*, Hassocks, Sussex, 1975; F. Bédarida, “Statistique et société en Angleterre au XIXe Siècle”, in *Pour une Histoire de la Statistique*, i (Paris, 1977), 493–508.

Potter (1903) and used it almost verbatim and without public acknowledgement in his novel *Clayhanger*.¹

The next step involved enterprising newspaper editors sending out special commissioners gathering material on their own, and the supreme example of this was provided by the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* and Henry Mayhew, whose classic *London Labour and the London Poor* appeared in that newspaper before emerging in book form in 1857 and in its final form in four volumes in 1861–2. This edition, reprinted unaltered in 1865, satisfied public demand for about eighty years. Since 1947 book after book consisting of edited extracts from Mayhew has appeared and a controversy has even broken out about his merits as a social observer. Exaggerated claims have been made for him as a sociologist, but, on the other hand, it is pointed out that he confined himself mainly to the lower strata of the London working classes and wrote comparatively little about the respectable poor of early Victorian London.² One wonders, too, whether he did not touch up and embellish the fluent and racy accounts which his clients gave him of their modes of life, manners, and methods of getting a living.

It is worth remembering that at the same time the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* commissioned an extension of Mayhew's survey over much of England and Wales—Angus Bethune Reach took some of the North and North West, Alexander Mackay began to survey rural England, Charles Mackay covered Liverpool and Birmingham and Charles Shirley Brooks the Midlands.³

¹ W. H. Chaloner, "The Rev. Charles Shaw and his anonymous *When I was a Boy* by an Old Potter, 1903 and its influence on Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger*" (*Proc. Wesley Historical Society*, vol. 40, June 1975).

² M. Dorothy George (ed.), *The Street Trader's Lot. London: 1851*, London, 1947, repr. for Readers Union, 1949; P. Quennell (ed.), *Mayhew's London*, London, 1949; P. Quennell (ed.), *London's Underworld*, London, 1950; P. Quennell, (ed.), *Mayhew's Characters*, London, 1951; J. L. Bradley (ed.), *Selections from London Labour and the London Poor*, London, 1956; Anne Humpherys (ed.), *Voices of the Poor: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 'Labour and the Poor' (1849–50)*, London, 1971; E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew: selections from the Morning Chronicle, 1849–50*, London, 1971. See also E. P. Thompson, "The political education of Henry Mayhew", *Victorian Studies*, xi (Bloomington, Ill., 1967–8), 41–62; J. R. T. Hughes, "Henry Mayhew's London", *Journal of Economic History*, xxix (New York, 1969), 526–36.

³ Thompson and Yeo, op. cit. p. 23.

Not all the names of the journalists who began to carry out this task are known, but it can be said that three of them, Reach and the two Mackays, gave a more rounded view of working-class society in the provinces than Mayhew did for London.¹

Mayhew and his colleagues were not alone. The late 1840s and the 1850s also witnessed the appearance of books with titles such as *The Rookeries of London: past, present, and prospective*,² *Sanitary Ramblings, being sketches and illustrations of Bethnal Green*,³ *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, exposing the sanitary discomforts of the metropolis⁴ and *Thrice Around the Clock or the hours of the day and night in London*.⁵ Rather later, but in the same tradition and spirit, came James Greenwood's *The Seven Curses of London* (1867).⁶

The Victorians were both fascinated and repelled by the problem of prostitution and these attitudes can be used as a sort of touchstone of their morality. Sir Archibald Alison, the sheriff of Lanarkshire, estimated that in 1840 there were between 30,000 and 40,000 prostitutes in London. *The Northern Star* of 2 December 1843 guessed that there were 80,000, although in fact no accurate metropolitan statistics are available. Mr. Gladstone's work trying to rescue London prostitutes dates from these same years and was to lead that fearless statesman into serious scrapes.⁷ The fuller discussion and analysis of this social problem came only after 1857 when Dr. William Acton brought out the first edition of his classic volume *Prostitution considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other large cities and Garrison Towns*. It will be remembered that this was the year of the Obscene Publications Act, but Acton's book was basically a socio-medical treatise. He had spent about three

¹ P. E. Razzell and R. W. Wainwright (eds.), *The Victorian Working Class ; selections from the letters to the Morning Chronicle*, London, 1973.

² By Thomas Beames, 1st edn. 1850, 2nd edn. 1852.

³ By Dr. Hector Gavin, 1848.

⁴ By George Godwin, 1859.

⁵ By G. A. Sala, 1859.

⁶ James Greenwood was the brother of Frederick Greenwood (1830-1909), first editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1865), for which James wrote in 1866 three sensational articles on "A night in a casual ward".

⁷ Sir P. Magnus, *Gladstone : a Biography* (London, 1954), p. 47 and passim. See also Joyce Marlowe (pseud. for Joyce M. Connor), *Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone*, London, 1977.

years as an externe in a Paris hospital (1836-9), had served briefly as secretary to the Parisian Medical Society, and must have been familiar with A. J. B. Parent-Duchâtelet's book *De la Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris*. Indeed, Acton did for London what Parent-Duchâtelet (1790-1836), known as the "[Sir Isaac] Newton of Harlotry", did for Paris.¹ French medicine at this period enjoyed a prestige in England similar to that held by German medicine and psychoanalysis after 1888. The appearance of Acton's volume probably encouraged Henry Mayhew and his collaborator Samuel Bracebridge to publish in 1862 the famous volume IV of *London Labour and the London Poor*, dealing with prostitutes, thieves, swindlers and beggars, i.e., in the words of the subtitle, "Those that will not work". Acton's book went into a second enlarged edition in 1870. One can see that the Victorians were less inhibited in their discussion of the "greatest of our social evils", as it was described in *The Times* early in 1858,² than is often asserted.

What began with the reprinting of selections from Mayhew, from 1947 onwards soon became a flood. During the past quarter of a century numerous books have appeared which purport to lay bare the immoralities and hypocrisies of Victorian society, beginning with Cyril Pearl's *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat* in 1955. This is a strange mixture of material melodramatically presented, some of it based on genuine if rather vague references and some of it based on hearsay of uneven quality. Indeed it is sometimes difficult to separate the hearsay from the facts. Some faint idea of the subjects covered may be gauged from the titles of the seven sections of the book: "The Victorian Myth", "The Victorian Reality", "Harlotry Triumphant", "A Theme of Fair Women", "London Amuses itself", "Dress and Undress", and "Pornography's Hydra Head". Next came Professor Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: a study of sexuality and pornography in mid-nineteenth-century England* (1964), reinforced by Walter: *The English Casanova*:

¹ W. Acton, *Prostitution* (ed. P. Fryer), pp. 7-9, 17.

² *The Times*, 24 February 1858. See also K. Neild (ed.), *Prostitution in the Victorian Age: Debates on the issue from 19th Century Critical Journals*, Farnborough, 1973, introduction (unpaginated); M. Pearson, *The Age of Consent: Victorian Prostitution and its enemies*, Newton Abbot, 1972.

a presentation of his unique memoirs, *My Secret Life* (1967) edited in two volumes with the ponderous smack of American-German scholarship by Drs. Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen.

The hard core of these two books is provided by the now world-famous 11-volume, 4,200-page "diary" of the unidentified "Walter", alleged to be a well-to-do Londoner, born about 1822, who survived at least until the early 1880s. In this writer's opinion Walter's "diary" is largely fiction and fantasy, the product of a diseased mind, foisted upon posterity by Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834-1900), a wealthy London merchant and book collector.

The bibliographical history of Walter's *My Secret Life* is not without its obscurities. Ashbee caused six copies of it to be set up and printed in Amsterdam about 1889, but the printer appears to have struck off about twenty to twenty-five extra sets of sheets and retained them. The first full modern edition, reset, was published in New York by the Grove Press in 1962 in two volumes with an introduction by G. Legman¹; this was reprinted in 1966. In 1967 the publishing house P.N.D. (Pendulum Books) of 123 Simpson Street N.W., Atlanta, Georgia, issued a facsimile reprint of the Amsterdam edition of the 1880s in eleven small limp cloth volumes under the title of *My Secret Life*, with a general preface, repeated unchanged in each volume, by Dale Coby and dated January 1967.

Ashbee possessed the finest Cervantic library outside Spain, plus 15,299 items of pornographic literature. Both these collections he left to the British Museum library, with the proviso that the library could not accept one without the other. The British Museum authorities wished to have nothing to do with the pornographic collection, but finally cupidity overcame distaste. Most writers on the subject appear to regard *My Secret Life* as authentic. My belief in its spurious nature rests on four main grounds:

(a) The suspiciously convenient timing of successive legacies to Walter by his well-to-do relatives, a stock fictional device and one widely indulged in in private fantasies.

¹ Author of an entertaining volume *The Horn Book, Studies in erotic folklore and bibliography*, New York, 1964.

(b) The fact that although Walter boasted of having had sexual intercourse, often more than once over long periods of time, with about 1,200 women, largely of the domestic servant and prostitute class, the number of his illegitimate children appears to have been remarkably small, given the imperfect knowledge of contraception at the time.

(c) The very odd accounts of his two alleged marriages, both of which were unfruitful.

(d) The comparative poverty, in the literary sense, of authentic background material in his narrative.

Walter's *My Secret Life* therefore falls, in my considered opinion, into the "easy to read, but difficult to believe" category. An anonymous reviewer of Marcus's book in the *Times Literary Supplement* came to the same general conclusion, but on different grounds.¹ And quite recently Professor H. Trevor-Roper has published a study of the late Victorian Sir Edmund T. Backhouse, Bt. (1873-1944), the son of a rather mean Quaker banker from the Northumberland-Durham area. Backhouse, who spent much of his life in China and died there, was an international "con-man". He too, like Ashbee/Walter, left behind him a set of memoirs of a strongly fantasist nature, in which he claimed to have had intercourse, among others, with the fifth Earl of Rosebery and the notorious Dowager Empress of China.² The only essential differences in favour of Backhouse's memoirs as against Walter's *My Secret Life* is that they are more entertaining and one meets a better class of person in reading them.

Five years after Steven Marcus's offering, Ronald Pearsall brought out *The Worm in the Bud: the world of Victorian sexuality* (London, 1969) with its curious "sin map" of London, on which Westminster Abbey figures on the strength of an isolated incident in the 1830s. This was followed by Kellow Chesney's somewhat less satisfactory *The Victorian Underworld* (1970). Neither Pearsall nor Chesney mention Walter's *My Secret Life* or Marcus's book.

As might have been expected, Dr. William Acton's classic

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 July 1967, p. 45.

² H. Trevor-Roper, *A Hidden Life: The Enigma of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (London, 1976), pp. 247, 254-6.

Prostitution reappeared about this time after nearly a century, firstly in an abridged version of the second edition with an excellent introduction and notes by Peter Fryer¹ and secondly in a full facsimile reprint, again of the second edition, in 1972.² Books on the whole subject appear without end, two of the latest being Eric Trudgill's *Madonnas and Magdalens: the origins and development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London, 1976) and Fraser Harrison's *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1977).

The literature so far mentioned tends to give the impression that in Victorian times sin stopped outside London, with the natural exceptions of the military and naval bases of southern England. Even after only a partial and preliminary examination of the provincial sources this seems to be incorrect. Clearly prostitution existed in the larger British towns and cities, but, as Léon Faucher³ observed in his *Manchester in 1844*,⁴ prostitution in the manufacturing districts did not have "the same audacity and publicity which distinguishes it in London and in the sea-ports; but if not so public, it may yet admit of a doubt whether it is less extended".⁵

The prostitutes of Liverpool, noted Faucher, occupied "the utmost vigilance of the police", but in Manchester their number was "scarcely ascertained", a rather odd statement, for he went on to quote from a report by the Manchester police dated 1840 which calculated that there were 285 house of ill-fame in the town of Manchester inhabited by 629 prostitutes. He continued by stating that in passing the Manchester Royal Exchange before dusk "the passenger [sc. passer-by] will be sure to meet 500 or 600, and to these should be added those of a higher rank, who do not descend to walk the streets publicly".⁶ A Glasgow town

¹ William Acton, *Prostitution*, edited with an introduction and notes by Peter Fryer, London, 1968. This edition was remaindered in 1971.

² William Acton, *Prostitution . . . with proposals for the control and prevention of its attendant evils*, ed. Professor Anne Humpherys, London, 1972.

³ London and Manchester, 1844; repr. London, 1969.

⁴ This was translated and annotated by J. P. Culverwell, a Benthamite barrister about whom little is at present known. Faucher wrote a series of articles on Britain for the *Revue des deux Mondes*, and these were afterwards collected and published in two volumes as *Etudes Sur L'Angleterre* (Paris, 1845).

⁵ Op. cit. p. 41.

⁶ Op. cit. p. 41.

missionary, Logan, estimated that there were 1,500 prostitutes in Manchester, a figure not wholly confirmed by the Manchester police report for 1843, which gave the number of brothels as 330, containing 722 bedrooms equipped with 973 beds. The number of prostitutes living in these brothels was 701, but Culverwell thought that there were as many again.¹

Faucher later went on "a nocturnal ramble . . . for the purpose of observation" in the company of Captain Beswick, the energetic chief of the Manchester police. He found that the prostitutes were far more polite in their method of accosting prospective customers in Manchester than in other towns. The explanation for this lay partly in the fact "the more decent prostitutes flock to Manchester, because it is, in . . . promiscuous intercourse, the rendezvous of the wealthier classes."² In support of this he quoted William Logan's pamphlet *An Exposure of Female Prostitution*: "There is not a single first-rate house for assignations in Rochdale, because the *gentlemen* always go to Manchester."³

Some confirmation of the statements in Faucher comes from the strange case of Sir John Potter and Madam Chester. The Potters, a Unitarian family from Tadcaster, had migrated to Manchester, where the second generation had set up the fraternal firm of William, Thomas and Richard Potter, cotton merchants, in 1802. Thomas Potter (1773-1845), after actively promoting the incorporation of Manchester as a borough in 1838, was elected its first Mayor and knighted in 1839 during his second term of office. His son, John Potter, born in Prestwich in 1815, attended Edinburgh University and succeeded his father as head of the family firm, by then Potter and Norris, wholesale drapers (later Potter and Taylor), in 1845. He continued his father's connection with Manchester Corporation, serving as alderman from 1845 to 1851, and was knighted at Manchester by Queen Victoria on 10 October 1851.⁴ At the General Election of March

¹ Op. cit. p. 42.

² Op. cit. p. 41.

³ The full title of Logan's pamphlet was *An Exposure, from personal observation, of Female Prostitution in London, Leeds, and Rochdale, and especially in the City of Glasgow*, Glasgow, 2nd edn., 1843.

⁴ Georgina Meinertzhagen, *From Ploughshare to Parliament: a short memoir of the Potters of Tadcaster*, London, 1908.

1857 he was elected one of the two members for Manchester. His election as M.P., which involved the defeat of John Bright, marked the split between the veterans of the Anti-Corn-Law League, Cobden and Bright, who had opposed the Crimean War (1854-6), and the Whiggish liberals, who had supported it. Engels wrote from Manchester to Karl Marx in London on 2 April 1857 :

Potter is a frightfully big and enormously fat creature, about 46 years old, red-haired and of a florid complexion, was thrice Mayor of Manchester, very jolly, has no brains, but much belly and arse. He introduced the wearing of gowns into the city council of this place, in connection with the Queen's visit, for which he was dubbed a knight. All his life he has been a great hunter after prostitutes (he's still a bachelor) and is especially intimate with the celebrated Miss Chester (*alias* Polly Evans), whom he has twice got pregnant, and to whose legal expenses he contributed £50 when she appeared at the Liverpool Assizes on an abortion charge and was acquitted.¹ He is a man who will please the country squires very much, and whose whole reputation rests upon the fact that his father Sir Thomas Potter, Knt., was in his time the leader of the local Liberal movement, and was the means of bringing Milner Gibson to Manchester. Potter junior is popular with the prostitutes, cab-drivers, publicans, street arabs and the less respectable elements among the citizenry. When he was Mayor the prostitutes enjoyed a respite from police harassment. His views are mildly Liberal.²

Most of what is known about Madam Chester comes from the verbose *Memoirs of Madam Chester of Manchester*. *By herself*, which is undated but given in the *British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books* under 1868. Her real name appears to have been Mary Evans but she was popularly known as "Polly" Evans. She was born on the Cefn estate, "the property of Mr. George Keynon", a short distance from Wrexham. The writing of such

¹ Partial confirmation of Engels's gossip comes from the following entry in the *Manchester Guardian* on Saturday, 21 August 1852, p. 5, col. 4, which contains an account of proceedings at the South Lancashire Summer Assizes at Liverpool, where, on Friday, 20 August, "Mary Chester (24) and Ann Murray (26) were indicted, for having, at Manchester, on the 4th December [1851] administered to Ellen Ravenscroft a large quantity of savin, with intent to procure miscarriage. Mr. Monk and Mr. Ovens appeared for the prosecutions, and for the defence Mr. Sergeant Wilkins and Mr. Tindal Atkinson. Both prisoners were acquitted; and the court then rose". The report is headlined "Causing Abortion at Manchester".

² K. Marx-Friedrich Engels: *Historische-Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 3rd Section, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1930), pp. 181-2. Translation copyright by W. H. Chaloner and W. O. Henderson.

memoirs by persons of Miss Chester's occupation was a commonplace in the early nineteenth century—those of Harriet Wilson in the 1820s are the most famous. It is practically impossible to check most of the statements made, but, clearly, after an exciting career she was by the 1860s reduced to keeping an establishment which combined the features of a brothel and night-club; she became bankrupt towards the end of the decade.

Manchester also had its own version of Henry Mayhew's classic, although on a smaller and less gifted scale. In 1858 there appeared a small volume, published by Abel Heywood of Oldham Street, Manchester, entitled *The Hawkers and Street Dealers of Manchester*, under the pseudonymous authorship of "Felix Folio", who turns out to have been John Page (1819-99). Page had migrated from Epsom in Surrey to Manchester in 1834, and in 1846 entered the service of Manchester Corporation as an assistant market toll collector. In this year the Corporation had bought the right to collect market tolls from the lord of the manor, Sir Oswald Mosley, Bt., and Page claimed to have collected the first toll under the new régime. In 1867 he was promoted to superintendent of the Markets Department. His book is a slight one in comparison with Mayhew's and shows a strong prejudice against street hawkers, who paid no tolls and merely needed to take out a hawker's licence at a low fee.¹ The later accounts of low life in London can also be paralleled by Walter Tomlinson's *Bye-Ways of Manchester Life*, published in Manchester in 1887, which originally appeared in 1885-6 in the columns of the *Manchester City News*, thereby following the Mayhew and Greenwood tradition. The subjects were much the same, a "Night in a Police Station", "The Night Asylum", "Low Lodging Houses", "Marketing with the Poor on a Saturday Night", but on the whole, compared with the accounts of late nineteenth-century London, they seem increasingly respectable and tame; even "the Sunday Saturnalia at Northenden" in Cheshire turn out to be merely free-and-easy boiled ham teas at a local public house. Clearly "the age of improvement" had set in.

¹ An obituary notice of John Page appears in *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club*, vol. xxv (1899) (*Manchester Quarterly*, vol. xvii), pp. 464-9.

It is often said that whereas the present century is obsessed by sex, the Victorian age was obsessed by death, its physical accoutrements and its mental accompaniments. Indeed, death, because of the high birth rate and the high death rate as compared with the present, played a far greater part in everyday life in the home and in the community than it does today. One would therefore expect that today scholarly books about the Victorian obsession with death would be as numerous and as learned (and sell as well) as modern books about Victorian sexual morality. Yet this is not so : only two books on this subject have appeared.¹ They do not seem to have been popular, for both were remaindered. It is suggested, therefore, that the literature dealt with in this essay not only tells us much about the Victorians but also a good deal about ourselves and our interests. The Victorians were neither more nor less immoral than the present generation. They just had different interests.

¹ John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, London, 1971 ; James S. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, Newton Abbot, 1972.