

PICTURES OF POVERTY: THE WORKS OF GEORGE R. SIMS AND THEIR SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

Lydia Jakobs

KINtop Studies in Early Cinema – vol. 7
 John Libbey Publishing Ltd, Herts, UK, 2021
 Paperback: ISBN 0-86196-752-0, £31.00 (US\$39.00)
 276 pages, 57 black & white and colour illustrations

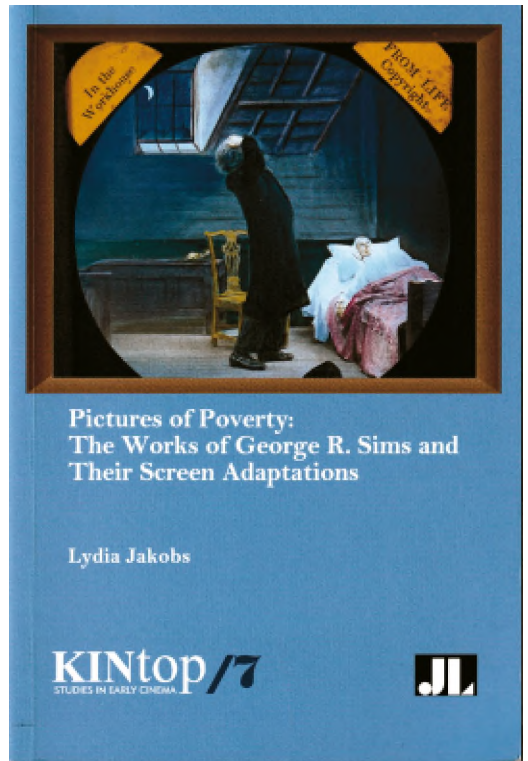
Most people today have never heard of the journalist, playwright, poet and man-about-town George Robert Sims (1847-1922) – but in his day he was a genuine celebrity, at least in Britain. Unusually he was also a celebrity with a social conscience, something to say about it, and a platform to say it from which he used to the full. There may still be a low-level awareness of a few of his works – perhaps the risqué parody version of ‘In the Workhouse: Christmas Day’ sung by soldiers in the trenches in *Oh! What a Lovely War* is the best-known example – but most of his prolific output of verses, articles, stories and plays is now unknown outside the special interests of cultural historians.

Which includes, of course, some of us: anyone interested in 19th-century British slide production, and especially Life Model slides, will have at least a passing

acquaintance with *Billy’s Rose*, *In the Signal Box*, *The Magic Wand* or one of the numerous other slide sets based on GRS’s socially-aware balladry. One of the earliest works I encountered in beginning to explore the strange and wonderful lantern slide world was Arthur Calder-Marshall’s *Prepare to Shed Them Now* (1968), filled with Sims’ well-above-average ballad verse, accompanying slide illustrations and a brief biography of the man himself. But apart from that volume and a couple of the similar reproductions in Mike Smith and G.A. Household’s *To Catch a Sunbeam* (1979), as far as I’m aware there has been no full-length serious study of Sims and his work, least of all in relation to its adaptations into other media.

But now there is. Our MLS Research Officer Lydia Jakobs’s long-awaited book, an adaptation of her PhD thesis defended at the University of Trier in 2019, goes a very long way to giving Sims and his work some of the wider recognition they deserve. It’s not a biography as such, though it opens with a very useful short outline of Sims’ life and career; instead it does pretty much what it says in the subtitle, concentrating on how his work fitted into the culture and concerns of the time, and particularly the ways in which GRS’s poems, articles and plays were translated into lantern slide sets and cinematograph films. Perhaps the way that most slide collectors or researchers become aware of Sims (this was certainly my own route) is through the Life Model genre: one of several useful appendices to *Pictures of Poverty* is a list of 47 known slide sets from the 1880s and 1890s, and 39 film adaptations between the 1900s and 1920s, based on Sims’ work. It’s sometimes tempting to refer to ‘Sims slide sets’, but

strictly there’s no such thing: there’s no direct evidence that Sims himself was directly involved in their creation, apart from an assumption that the slide makers probably came to some financial arrangement with the author or his publishers, both of whom were far too commercially canny to allow free ‘borrowing’ of their intellectual property.



George R. Sims around 1884 – portrait photo by Walery of London



Image adaptation from print to slide: (left) ‘Mrs O’Flannigan’, illustration by Frederick Barnard from Sims’ *How the Poor Live* (1883); (right) ‘Mrs O’Flannigan’, slide 8 of *Outcast London: or How the Poor Live* (lecture: 40 slides, York & Son, c.1884) (Lydia Jakobs Collection)



Contrasts in Christmas cheer: (left) Slide 1 and (right) Slide 7 of *In the Workhouse* (recitation: 9 slides, Bamforth, 1890) (Banham Collection)

There's quite a bit of background and set-up in the book before we get to the media adaptations themselves, which helps a lot in understanding the context of the slides and films when we do arrive there. Besides establishing who Sims was and roughly what he did, there are discussions of Victorian culture in general, especially depictions of poverty in its publications, engravings and photographs; of Sims' treatment of social deprivation in his journalism and other publications; and of modern research resources that cast light into this area, particularly some intelligent and critical discussion of the pros and cons of digitised newspapers (including the refreshing conclusion that "digital resources produce the best research results when used alongside more traditional archival resources" (p. 243)). All of that serves as important preparation for and background to the final, and longest, chapter, which presents case studies of three typical Sims texts: his 1883 series of articles, later published in book form, *How the Poor Live* and two of his ballads, 'In the Workhouse' (1877) and 'The Road to Heaven' (1882).

As pieces of research and presentation, these three case studies are exemplary in their thoughtfulness and attention to detail – 30 pages for *How the Poor Live* and around 50 for each of the recitations. In each case there's a close discussion of Sims' original publication, then examination of the slides and films arising from it, with comparison between different slide images, original illustrations and other visual sources. The amount of illustration is generous, and the reproduction very fine, with many of the slides rendered as half-page colour illustrations giving a richness of detail not always possible in printed reproduction. And – unusually for a scholarly treatment of lantern slides, which is all too often done in a superficial way by people more interested in other subjects – this is all written up carefully and knowledgeably, in very smooth readable prose that packs in a lot of information but also *cares* about its subject. Perhaps in a few places this involves recitation of things that may be familiar to those of us foolish enough to think we know everything there is to know about Life Model slides, but actually Lydia's clear approach to the subject and her wide-ranging research make this a fresh account that (to speak for myself again) gave me some new ways of thinking about these familiar subjects. I daresay film scholars would find some of the same effect as well. Which is exactly what a book like this should be doing – proper scholarship ought not only to show how much knowledge has been gathered,

but just as importantly how much scope there is to learn more.

Pictures of Poverty is a scholarly book (that's meant as a compliment), and also in places mildly 'academic' in its tone and language; that's only to be expected in something that originates as a successful PhD thesis from a leading research university. So everything is carefully argued and backed up with references – if you're allergic to footnotes or words of more than four syllables you may want to consider vaccination before venturing in. But I wouldn't say it's excessively so: Lydia writes and argues clearly and readably without over-theorising or hiding behind jargon. If sometimes you have to think a bit about the

relevance of the point she's making, it's worth it for the insights the contextual information gives you when you reach the descriptions of the slides and films, which are possibly the main reasons why a person of a lantern persuasion would come to this book in the first place.

The book's conclusion – a short chapter nicely titled 'Perspectives' – ties together most of what has gone before in considered and open-minded ways. The opening chapters' discussions of representations of poverty as 'picturesque' (i.e. slightly romanticised) or 'authentic' (gritty realism) come back with a different emphasis once we've spent some time looking at Life Model slides and considered how they were used and how their audiences reacted. For example there's a very pertinent comparison with travel slide sets: "descriptions of 'hidden' poverty (in workhouses, slum buildings and common lodging-houses) presented a strange and foreign environment to audiences unable or unwilling to gain first-hand knowledge" (p. 239). Illustration of the lives of unfortunate people with painted backdrops and ragged costumes isn't simple or straightforward – perhaps the best trick of Sims' use of the verse ballad form in the first place is to employ words and rhythms that sound simple to raise complicated issues and situations, and for me at least the Life Model treatment of his work does something similar in pictures. The situations that (among others) Bamforth and York try to recreate may look, to our knowing and 'sophisticated' modern eyes, rather crude and clunky, but think a little further and there are often some profound questions being raised by what is shown.

At a time when social inequality is back in all its ugliness (if it's ever really been away), in ways which some of us, at least in Britain, had mistakenly imagined to be things of the past; a time when our social welfare system has been dismantled and returned towards one which



Two versions of the same shocking moment: (left) Slide 5 of *The Road to Heaven* (recitation: 6 slides, Bamforth, 1880s), Cinémathèque française; (right) Slide 5 of *The Road to Heaven* (recitation: 9 slides, Bamforth, 1891), private collection.

seems to offer more or less explicit punishments for being 'undeserving' poor; a time when people can find themselves begging on the street for reasons that may amount to little more than bad luck; there's one lurking question which gives this book and its subject more relevance than ever. Where is George R. Sims now that we need him?!

Looking at popular culture(s) of the past, especially the British nineteenth century, often involves discovering with something approaching pleasure that 'they', the primitive dwellers of the past, are really pretty much like 'us', in all our clever modern sophistication. It's relatively easy, and not always very interesting, to point out similar concerns (celebrities, royalty, sport, international disputes...) in the news and features content of Victorian media which are similar, or at least parallel, to those of our own time. But – and for me it's quite an important 'but' – there's one essential element clearly missing from our modern culture, and it's the kind of media-based social criticism produced by Sims and a few of his contemporaries. 'They' could express genuine social concern in widely distributed and accessible forms; could ask intelligent questions about what was going on in society (and/or going wrong, depending on one's point of view); and could at least hope to reach an audience who were willing and able to listen and consider changing things. For all our media channels, 'we' no longer seem to have good mechanisms for doing those things.

As far as Lydia's book is concerned, this is probably an unintended

consequence, but it's a strong one. I doubt if throwing sidelights on 21st-century British social politics was really part of the intention when she set out on researching her PhD or converting it into this book – but history is strange and sometimes surprising in the way it can tell us more about 'now' than 'then'. You can like Sims' social-concern ballads, or not; you can also either appreciate the (possibly) moving visual style of the Life Model or film adaptations, or dismiss them as clumsy and mawkish. But what you can't do, I suggest, is find any clear present-day equivalent of them in any medium, either in the popular appeal of what they set out to do or the amount of impact they succeed in making. Certainly there are modern pieces of work that express concern about social issues – perhaps the films of Ken Loach, in a very different way, front up to the same general set of problems that Sims tackles – but they can hardly be described as mainstream culture and don't feature in the popular press or other media.

Why and how society in general has lost contact with this type of awareness is, of course, a much bigger question and beyond the scope of Lydia's book or this journal – but one of the many positive things *Pictures of Poverty* does is to encourage us think a little about whether, and how, we need contributions to our social and political debates (such as they are) like those George Sims made to the same discussions in his own time. In that respect alone, if nothing else, Lydia's work does Sims and his legacy a great good service.

Richard Crangle