

'HOW THE POOR LIVE'

George R. Sims and the Outcasts of London

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George Sims (1847-1922) was a journalist, bohemian, playwright, poet, and fiction writer known not only for his poetry and humour, but also for investigations, writings and deep concerns about poverty in London (Fig. 1). The research and writings of Lydia Jakobs provide an excellent and in-depth review of his works and information about related slide sets.¹ In 1883 Sims wrote 13 articles titled 'How the Poor Live' that were published in *The Pictorial World* between 2 June and 25 August, providing a vividly narrated description of the findings of his journey to visit and report on that subject. As early as December that same year the combined articles were published under the same title in the form of a 'shilling book' by London publisher Chatto & Windus.²

Prior to his writing of *How the Poor Live* Sims had already built a reputation as a journalist and fiction writer.³ For example, his *Dagonet Ballads* were published in March 1879, *The Ballads of Babylon* in 1880, *The Lifeboat and Other Poems* in 1883.⁴ However the 1883 book and contribution to *The Pictorial World* marked his first foray into investigative journalism.⁵

In the opening comments to his first article in the series Sims describes his work as: "A journey with pen and pencil into a region which lies at our own doors – into a dark continent that is within easy reach of the General Post Office." As Joss Marsh and David Francis describe it: "... he brought the disposed of the nation and its 'Monster City', the 'Outcast' and 'Horrible' London into the homes of the middle-class readers."⁶

On this journey to visit the 'slum-dwellers' Sims brought with him Frederick Barnard (Fig. 2), a well-known black and white sketch artist, perhaps best remembered for his drawings seen in numerous Charles Dickens publications. As they journeyed through the area, Barnard made his sketches 'on the spot'. According to Sims: "where they penetrated, a camera would not have been tolerated."⁷ When the shilling book was published it included 60 Barnard drawings documenting the scenes, people and situations they encountered.

Barnard's work was greatly appreciated by Sims, as shown in this quotation from the book's preface: "I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to Mr Frederick Barnard, the eminent artist, who, at considerable risk to his health and comfort, accompanied me on a painful journey, and took his sketches 'on the spot', amid the most distasteful surroundings."⁸

Barnard would work as unobtrusively as possible, as can be seen in his sketch of a 'B' meeting – a meeting held under the auspices of the School Board to hear the reasons parents had for why they should not be summoned to appear before a magistrate for neglecting to send their children to school (Fig. 3). On the

right of the sketch Barnard included himself, hiding to some extent the fact that he was making sketches, and just to the left of him is Sims.⁹

For decades prior to Sims' articles, numerous journalistic articles had been written and investigations made about

housing issues and related living conditions in London, but, up to then, without the topic becoming a major political or social question.¹⁰ Following the publication of Sims's 13 articles, numerous publications by others followed suit between 1883 and 1889, and in particular the October 1883 pamphlet *Bitter Cry of Outcast London* by Andrew Mearns.¹¹ Together these writings contributed to an awakening by the public and government to the housing problem and a greater public awareness of the slums of London.

Between 19 November 1887 and 11 February 1888, the illustrated comic weekly *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* re-serialised Sims's articles and Barnard's illustrations as a supplement.¹² In 1889 Chatto & Windus reissued the shilling book without Barnard's sketches, but they included Sim's letters 'Horrible London' which had previously been published in *The Daily News*. The basic text of *How the Poor Live*, while in essence the same as the 1883 original publication, was modified to reflect that there were no images.¹³

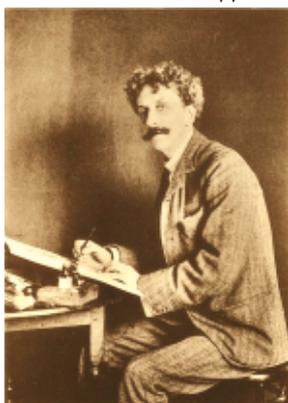
Sometime during this period and prior to 1884, York & Sons issued a set of 40 coloured slides based on the Barnard drawings. They were published with the name *Outcast London: How the Poor Live*. While the title suggests a relation to the Andrew Mearns publication, the individual slide titles frequently match the captions of Frederick Barnard's illustrations for *How the Poor Live*. George Sims's text was not mentioned in the catalogue and no accompanying reading was offered for lecturers.¹⁴ In addition to the York & Sons slides a later set (1924) by E.G. Wood on East End life is listed in *Lucerna*.¹⁵

Several years ago I obtained a partial set of slides of Barnard's images. Differing from the York & Sons slides, this partial set contains 22 slides of the exact black and white images of Barnard's sketches. Unfortunately, there is no indication of the slide maker. Three of the slides have combined two separate drawings from the article into one slide, thus this set includes 25 of the original 60 sketches. Just a few weeks prior to completing this article I was able to add four more slides to my collection. They too are Barnard's sketches, but coloured. Two were duplicates of my original black and white images, but two were new additions, bring the total to 27 of the 60 original sketches. Several of the missing images were small inserted drawings such as a boot breaking through the floor and a small image of a dangerous staircase.

A few of these slides have paper labels on the outer edge indicating the title of the image. Some also have a paper label inside the glass that says: "Outcast London By permission of the publisher." However, no name of the publisher is given. A few of the slides have sequence numbers that are inside the glass. Interestingly, the numbering does not match the sequence of the images in the original text of Sims's



1. George R. Sims



2. Frederick Barnard



3. Barnard's sketch of the 'B' meeting

articles, but they do appear to match the numbering for the York & Sons set as listed in *Lucerna*.

Since there is no known reading for either this partial set or the York & Sons set, I have created a reading for each of the slides in my collection by extracting the text relating to each scene from Sim's 1883 shilling book.¹⁶ This reading also places the slides in the same order that they appeared in Sim's original writing of *How the Poor Live*. In some instances, where the text would have been too long for a lantern

presentation, I have removed sections of the original writing while endeavouring to maintain the critical description of the situation and the thrust of Sim's message. The text for each of the following slides has been reduced for space but presents the exact words of Sim. As you will see in the following selection, his narrative is like a tour guide pointing out and sharing vivid details of the poverty, housing conditions, work issues, and the general life of the London outcast. My observations and additional information are shown in italics.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Slide 7: Unexpected visitor (Chapter I, pp. 5-6)

We walk along a narrow dirty passage, which would effectually have stopped the Claimant had he come to this neighbourhood in search of witnesses, and at the end we find ourselves in what we should call a back yard, but which, in the language of this neighbourhood, is a square. The square is full of refuse, heaps of dust and decaying vegetable matter lie about here and there, under the windows and in front of the doors of the squalid tumble-down houses.

The windows above and below are broken and patched, the roofs of these two-storeyed "eligible residences" look as though Lord Alcester had been having some preliminary practice with his guns here before he set sail for Alexandria. All these places are let out in single rooms at prices varying from 2s. 6d. to 4s. a week. We can see a good deal of the inside through the cracks and crevices and broken panes, but if we knock at the door, we shall get a view of the inhabitants. Our knock has alarmed the neighbourhood. Who are we? The police? No! Who are we?

The duplicate slides provide an interesting comparison. In the coloured slide we have a bright blue sky, and the colour makes the scene seem more vibrant than desolate. Yes, there are still the broken windows and trash, but the darkness of the reality of that deplorable scene is lessened. Although in one sense it fits an introductory statement from Sim: "... and the rays of God's sunshine lose their way now and again and bring light and gladness into the vilest of the London slums."



Slide 3: 'On duty' (Chapter I, p. 9)

We have reached the attic, and in that attic, we see a picture which will be engraved on our memory for many a month to come. A broken flower-pot props open a crazy window-frame, possibly to let the smoke out, or in – looking at the chimney-pots below, it is difficult to say which; and at one side of the room is a sack of Heaven knows what – it is a dirty, filthy sack, greasy and black and evil looking.

I cannot guess what was in it if I tried, but what was on it was a little child, a neglected ragged, grimed, and bare-legged little baby girl of four. There she sat, in the bare squalid room, perched on the sack, erect, motionless, expressionless, on duty.

She was "a little sentinel," left to guard a baby that lay asleep on the bare boards behind her, its head on its arm, the ragged remains of what had been a shawl flung over its legs. To think of that little child, keeping guard on that dirty sack for six or eight hours at a stretch – think of her utter loneliness in that bare, desolate room, every childish impulse checked, left with orders "not to move or I'll kill yer," and sitting there often till night and darkness came on, hungry, thirsty, and tired herself, but faithful to her trust to the last minute of the drunken mother's absence.

Slide 17: Rabbit pulling (Chapter II, pp. 11-13)

Let us see some of the poor people who earn an honest living. Well, 'living' perhaps, is hardly the word – let us say, who can earn enough to pay their rent and keep body and soul together.

The room is about eight feet square. Seated on the floor is a white fairy – a dark-eyed girl who looks as though she had stepped straight off a twelfth cake. Her hair is powdered all over à la *Pompadour*, and the effect is *bizarre*. Standing beside her is an older woman, and she is white and twelfth-cakey too. They are simply pulling rabbit-skins – that is to say they are pulling away all the loose fluff and down and preparing the skins for the furriers.

"Then why not move?" I ventured to suggest. "Four shillings a week – ten guineas a year – for this pigsty is an exorbitant rent – you might do better." The woman shook her head. "There's lots o' better places we'd like to go to, but they won't have us. They object to our business. We must go where they'll take us." "But there are plenty of places a little way out where you can have two rooms for what you pay for this." "A little way out, yes; but how are we to get to and fro with the work when it's done? We must be near our work. We can't afford to ride." Exactly, and therein lies one of the things which reformers have to consider.



Slide 8: Mrs O'Flannigan (Chapter III, pp. 15 and 17)

Here is the home of the most notorious 'drunkardess' – if I may coin a word – in the neighbourhood. Biddy has been charged at the police-courts seventy-five times with being drunk, and she is therefore a celebrated character.

"I'm a pretty sight now, ain't I, gintlemen dear?" she says, with a foolish laugh. "Shure and I got blind drunk again last Saturday, and they run me in. The inspector let me out o' Sunday: God bless him for a rale gintleman. They carried me on a stretcher, bless yer hearts, and I kicked. Ha! Ha! Ha!" The hag positively yelled with laughter as she thought of the scene she caused and the trouble she gave the police.

"You should give up getting drunk," I ventured to suggest; "then you wouldn't want a nurse." "You're right, your honour. It's the drink. Yer see, I can't help it. I ain't been sober for five years – Ha! Ha! Ha! – and it's all thro' the trouble as come to me. My boy got into bad company and got lagged and put away for ten years, and I've never been the same since, and it broke my heart, and I took to the drink. And now my old man's took to drink thro' aggravation o' me, and he gets drunk every night of his blessed life. Ha! Ha! Ha!" Had these people been able to get a decent room among decent people, the first misfortune that sent them wrong might never have happened. Their case is the case of hundreds.



Slide 31: A bit of her mind (Chapter IV, pp. 21-22)

Parents are summoned to a meeting with the School Board to explain why their children are not in school. At the 'B' meeting parents come and go as part and parcel of the 'Inquisition'. Here is a lady who very much objects to being summoned.

One of the critical factors for children to attend school is having shoes or in this case boots to wear. Her boy had been given boots, claims they hurt him, but when brought into the meeting admits to being able to wear them. The meeting is quite heated as seen in the abbreviated selected text.

"What bizerness 'as he to summings me," (she says, pointing to the officer), "just cus my boy ain't bin fur a week? He's 'arsh and harbitury, that's what he is – 'arsh and harbitury. D'ye think I ain't got anything to do without a-trapesin' down here a-losin' my work. I tell ye what it is."

The boy had a decent pair of boots supplied him (said one of the officers).

"Which, beggin' your pardon," strikes in the angry lady, "it's like your imperence to say so. They 'urt the boy, they did, and he haves tender feet, through his father, as is dead, being a shoemaker hisself." "My boy play about the street! Well, of all the oudacious things as ever I 'eard! And as to his comin' to school he's a beautiful little scholar now, and he ain't got no more to learn."

He confessed that the boots didn't hurt him, and Mrs Dash was informed that if he didn't forthwith attend she would be summoned. With much difficulty Mrs Dash was induced to retire.



Slide 16: 'Appy dossers (Chapter V, p. 23)

The "appy dossers" are the wretched people who roam about the street houseless, and creep in to sleep on the stairs, in the passages and untenanted cellars of the lodging houses with the doors open night and day.

No policeman's lantern is ever turned on them, and they crowd together in their rags and make a jolly night of it. Sometimes in among them creeps a starving woman, to die from want and exposure; and she dies while the foul oath and the ribald jests go on.

Thus, not only are many of the licensed lodging-houses and homes of the poor breeding-houses in themselves for crime, disease, and filth, but they are, for lack of supervision, receptacles for that which has already been bred elsewhere, and which is deposited gratis, to swell the collection.

Education has done much. The new generation is learning at least to be clean if not to be honest. The young mothers of the slums – the girls who have been at the Board Schools – have far tidier homes already than their elders. The old people born and bred in filth won't live out of it. These people are irreclaimable, but they will die out, and the new race can be worked for with hope and with a certainty of success. Hard as are some of the evils of the Education Act, they are outbalanced by the good, and it is that Act above all others which will eventually bring about the new order of things so long desired.



Slide 28: Which will you have? (Chapter VI, pp. 30-31)



The first working of the Education Act was fraught with countless difficulties. But in the course of a few years almost every difficulty has been conquered, and now there is hardly a child above a certain age – no matter how wretched its condition may be – that is not brought within the beneficial influence of education.

Here is a child [on the left] who is but one remove from an idiot. This poor waif – the offspring of a gentleman whose present address is Holloway Gaol, and a lady who has been charged seventy-three times with being drunk and incapable – must pass a certain standard before she can leave school. In her case, if she lives, she will pass out by age, for statistics show that no system can make this class of intellect retain a lesson. It is sowing seed upon a rock, and there will be no harvest; but the child has just sufficient intelligence to escape the asylum, and between the asylum and the school there is no half-way house.

Side by side with her sits a pretty, intelligent little girl of nine. This child's eyes are bright with intelligence; the features are pleasing and regular. This girl learns quickly, and has had all the better

qualities brought out. She is neat and takes a pride in her personalised appearance.

She has learnt to be ashamed of dirt, and she is ambitious to be high up in her class. Ambition is the one quality which will help above all others to lift the poor out of degradation. The older race have it not; hence they are content with their present positions, only seeking to gratify their daily appetites, and caring not a fig for the morrow. This child will do well, whatever she undertakes; and it is such as she who will survive in the battle of life, and become the mothers of a better and more useful class.

Slide 23: Fine straw-ber-ries (Chapter IX, p. 45)

I alluded in a recent Chapter to the costermongers as a large and worthy class. To what I have already written let me add that until now I had not the slightest conception that things were so bad as they really are. My visit was early in the morning, before the men and women had gone out with their loads. If you could have seen the condition of the rooms and yards piled up with rotting vegetable refuse, and the way in which the cabbages and the fruit were stowed for the night, and where they were stowed, it would have cured such among you as are fond of a bargain at the door from ever patronising a barrow again.



Out of the fetid one room where man and wife and family slept, they carried the stuff that their neighbours were to eat. It had passed the night with them, and the green stuff was decidedly faded and languid. It was piled on the barrow, and then soused with dirty water, and so wheeled away to be cried up and down the streets of London. No wonder diseases are spread if from such poisoned fever-breeding dens as this the food is carried with all its impurity day after day to be hawked from door to door.



Slide 22: Saturday night (Chapter X, pp. 47 and 49)

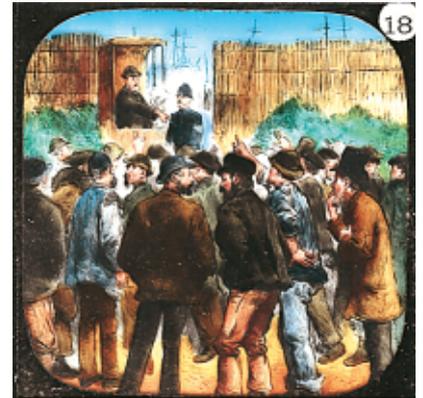
How do the poor amuse themselves? The principal amusement of the people who have no money is, I take it, loafing at street corners and gossiping with their neighbours, and the form of enjoyment by far the most prevalent is getting drunk.

All the world and his wife are out to-night, and the wildest extravagances are being committed in the way of fish for supper to-night and vegetables for dinner to-morrow. The good housewives, basket on arm, are giving the readywitted hawker as much repartee over the price of a cabbage as would suffice for a modern comedy.

Slide 18: At the dock gates (Chapter XII, pp. 57-61)

To get an odd job at the docks is often the last hope of the labouring men who are out of regular employment, and to whom the acquisition of a few shillings for rent, and the means of subsistence for them and their families, is a task fraught with much difficulty. The pay is fivepence an hour, and the day's work lasts for eight hours. It is generally about six o'clock that the quay-gangers ascend the rostrums or elevated stands and commence to call them out for work and send them into the different docks.

Many of them are regular men, who are called 'Royals' and who are pretty sure to be taken on, their names being on the ganger's list and called out by him as a matter of course. The strangest part of the crowd are the ragged, wretched, woebegone-looking outcasts who are penniless, and whose last hope is that they may have the luck to be selected by the ganger. The common body of men who are classed as 'Dock labourers' are reckoned as among the poorest of the London poor who make an honest effort to keep out of the workhouse.



Summation (Chapter XIII, p. 64)

Sims closes his series with the following summation message.

The density of the population in certain districts, and the sanitary defects of the tenements, are at present absolute dangers to the Public Health. On this ground alone it is desirable to agitate for reform; but there is a broader ground still – humanity. It is on that broad ground I venture to ask those who by these scant sketches of a great evil have become in some slight way acquainted with it, to raise their voices and give strength to the cry which is going up at last for a rigid and searching inquiry into the conditions under which the Poor of this vast city live.

To leave the world a little better than he found it, is the best aim a man can have in life, and no labour earns so sweet and so lasting a reward as that which has for its object the happiness of others.

Public opinion boldly expressed never fails to compel the obedience of those who guide the destinies of states. Public opinion is a chorus of voices, and the strength of that chorus depends upon the manner in which each individual member of it exerts his vocal power. How long the scandal which disgraces the age shall continue depends greatly, therefore, good reader, upon your individual exertions. If aught that has been written or drawn here, then, has enlisted your sympathy, pass from a recruit to a good soldier of the cause, and help with all your will and all your strength to make so sad a story as this impossible when in future years abler pen and pencil than ours shall perhaps once again attempt to tell you – 'how the poor live'.

CLOSING COMMENTS

The sketches by Barnard, these published slides of his sketches, and the York & Sons slides, coupled with Sims's description of what he observed on his 'journey', provide a powerful demonstration of use of the magic

lantern as a proactive social media tool – a highly effective means of reaching large audiences regarding major social issues.

Finally, if anyone has all or parts of either the York & Sons slides or any of the Barnard slides please let me know.

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