

CHARLES L. GRAVES



**MR. PUNCH'S
HISTORY
OF MODERN
ENGLAND**

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Mr. Punch's History of Modern England

Enriched edition. 1841-1914

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Layla Donovan

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PREFACE

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The title of this work indicates at once its main source and its limitations. The files of *Punch* have been generally admitted to be a valuable mine of information on the manners, customs, and fashions of the Victorian age, and of the wealth of material thus provided liberal use has been made. But it must not be forgotten that *Punch* has always been a London paper, and that in so far as English life is reflected in his pages, London always comes first, though in this volume, and especially during the "Hungry 'Forties," Lancashire comes a very good second. For pictures of provincial society—such, for example, as that given in *Cranford* or in the novels of Trollope—or of life in Edinburgh or Dublin, the chronicler of Victorian England must look outside *Punch*. The "country cousin" is not forgotten, but for the most part comes into view when he is on a visit to London, not when he is on his native heath. Yet even with these deductions the amount of material is embarrassingly rich. And this is due not only to the multiplicity of subjects treated, but to the manner in which they were discussed. Of *Punch*, in his early days at any rate, the criticism recently applied to Victorian writers in general by a writer in *Blackwood* holds good: "They had a great deal to say, and they said it sometimes in too loud a voice. Such was their virtue, to which their vice was akin. Their vice was the vice of rhetoric. They fell to the temptation of many words. They wrote too often as the tub-thumper speaks, without much self-criticism and with a too fervent desire to be heard

immediately and at all costs." In the 'forties *Punch* doubled the rôles of jester and political pamphleteer, and in the latter capacity indulged in a great deal of vehement partisan rhetoric. The loudest, the most passionate and moving as well as the least judicial of his spokesmen was Douglas Jerrold^[1]. The choice of dividing lines between periods must always be somewhat artificial, but I was confirmed in my decision to end the first volume with the year of the Indian Mutiny by the fact that it coincided with the death of Douglas Jerrold, who from 1841 to 1857 had, more than any other writer, been responsible for the Radical and humanitarian views expressed in *Punch*.

My task would have been greatly simplified by the exclusion of politics altogether. But to do that would have involved the neglect of what is, after all, perhaps the most interesting and in many ways the most honourable phase of *Punch's* history, his championship of the poor and oppressed, and his efforts to bridge the gap between the "Two Nations"—the phrase which was used and justified in the finest passage of Disraeli's *Sybil*, and which I have chosen as the title for the first part of the present volume. To write a Social History of England at any time without reference to the political background would be difficult; it is practically impossible in a chronicle based on *Punch* in the 'forties and 'fifties. In the second part I have endeavoured to redress the balance. Here one recognizes the advantages of *Punch's* London outlook in dealing with the Court and fashion and the acute contrasts furnished between Mayfair on the one hand and the suburbs and slums on the other.

No attempt has been made to represent *Punch* as infallible whether as a recorder, a critic, or a prophet. He was often wrong, unjust, and even cruel—notably in his view of Peel and Lincoln, and in his conduct of the "No Popery" crusade—though he seldom failed to make amends, even to the extent of standing in a white sheet over Lincoln's grave. But the majority of these confessions took the form of posthumous tributes. As for the gradual cooling of *Punch's* democratic ardour, that may be attributed partly to the removal or remedying of abuses by legislation and the education of public opinion; partly to the fact that newspapers follow the rule of individuals, and tend to become more moderate as they grow older. The great value of *Punch* resides in the fact that it provides us with a history of the Victorians *written by themselves*. This is no guarantee of the accuracy of the facts recorded. We have had painful proof in recent years that contemporary evidence, when based on hearsay, even though written down red-hot in a diary, is, to put it mildly, incapable of corroboration. But, as reflecting the nature and mood of the writer, contemporary evidence is always interesting. My aim has been to supply a critical commentary, and, where possible, to verify or correct the statements or judgments recorded in *Punch*. Acknowledgments of the various authorities consulted will be found in the footnotes, but I should like to express my special indebtedness to the *Dictionary of National Biography*; to the *New English Dictionary*; to *The Political History of England*, by Sir Sidney Low and Mr. Lloyd Sanders; to Mr. C.R. Fay's *Life and Labour in the Nineteenth Century*;

and, where the inner or domestic history of the paper is concerned, to Mr. M. H. Spielmann's *History of Punch*.

The work of preparing this volume has been greatly lightened by the encouragement and practical help of Mr. Philip Agnew, the managing director, and Mr. Heather, the secretary, of Messrs. Bradbury, Agnew and Co.; by Miss Berry's transcription of extracts; and, above all, by the research, the advice and suggestions of Miss M. R. Walpole, the assistant librarian of the Athenæum Club.

CHARLES L. GRAVES.

PART I

THE TWO NATIONS

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PUNCH AND THE PEOPLE

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O! fair and fresh the early spring
Her budding wreath displays,
To all the wide earth promising
The joy of harvest days;
Yet many a waste of wavy gold
Hath bent above the dead;
Then let the living share it too—
Give us our daily bread[1q].

Of old a nation's cry shook down
The sword-defying wall,
And ours may reach the mercy-seat,
Though not the lordly hall.
God of the Corn! shall man restrain
Thy blessings freely shed?
O! look upon the isles at last—
Give us our daily bread.

The Founders of "Punch[2]"

It is fitting that a chronicle of social life in England in the Victorian age, drawn in its essentials from the pages of *Punch*, should begin with the People. For *Punch* began as a radical and democratic paper, a resolute champion of the poor, the desolate and the oppressed, and the early volumes abound in evidences of the miseries of the "Hungry 'Forties[3]" and in burning pleas for their removal. The strange mixture of jocularly with intense earnestness which

confronts us on every page was due to the characters and antecedents of the men who founded and wrote for the paper at its outset. Of at least three of them it might be said that they were humanitarians first and humorists afterwards. Henry Mayhew^[4], one of the originators and for a short time joint-editor, was "the first to strike out the line of philanthropic journalism which takes the poor of London as its theme," and in his articles in the *Morning Chronicle* and his elaborate work on *London Labour and the London Poor*, which occupied him intermittently for the best part of twenty years, showed himself a true forerunner of Charles Booth. His versatility was amazing. The writer of the obituary notice of him in the *Athenæum* observes that "it would not be difficult to show him as a scientific writer, a writer of semi-religious biography, and an outrageous joker at one and the same time." Another member of the original staff was Gilbert à Beckett^[5], who crowded an extraordinary amount of work into his short life as leader-writer on *The Times*, comic journalist, dramatist, Poor Law Commissioner and Metropolitan Magistrate. It was à Beckett's report on the scandal connected with the Andover Union^[6]—pronounced by the Home Secretary, Buller, to be one of the best ever presented to Parliament—that led to important alterations in the Statute book, and secured for him, at the age of thirty-eight, his appointment as Metropolitan Police Magistrate. Thackeray's references to "à Beckett the beak" are frequent and affectionate, and on his death in 1856 a noble tribute was paid him in the pages of the journal he had served from its opening number. "As a magistrate, Gilbert à Beckett, by his wise, calm, humane

administration of the law, gave a daily rebuke to a too ready belief that the faithful exercise of the highest and gravest social duties is incompatible with the sportiveness of literary genius." These words were penned by Douglas Jerrold, who died within a year of his friend, and was the most ardent and impassioned humanitarian of the three. By the irony of fate Jerrold is chiefly remembered for his sledge-hammer retorts: the industrious and ingenious playwright is little more than a name; the brilliant publicist and reformer, the friend and associate of Chartists[8], the life-long champion of the underdog is forgotten. Gilbert à Beckett and Henry Mayhew had both been at Westminster. Their people were well-to-do. Douglas Jerrold had known both poverty and privation, and his education was largely acquired in a printer's office. His brief service in the Navy was long enough to make him a strenuous advocate of the claims of the lower deck to more humane treatment. He did not believe that harsh discipline and flogging were necessary to the efficiency of either Service. As a boy he had seen something of the human wreckage of war, and the spectacle had cured him for ever of any illusions as to militarism. But his distrust of Emperors, Dictators and the "King business" generally—always excepting Constitutional Monarchy—was so pronounced that any interference on their part was enough to convert him into a Jingo. How far he was from being a pacifist may be judged from the temper of *Punch* in the Crimean War, its advocacy of ruthlessness as the best means of shortening the hostilities, and its bitter criticism of Lord Aberdeen and Mr. Gladstone, and above all of Cobden and Bright, for their alleged pro-Russian sympathies. In the

'forties Cobden and Bright were the leaders of that group of "middle-class men of enthusiasm and practical sagacity" which directed the Free Trade movement, and they had been supported by *Punch* in the campaign against the Corn Laws[7]. Douglas Jerrold was the spear-head of *Punch's* attacks on Protection, Bumbledom, unreformed Corporations, Cant and Snobbery, the cruelty, the inequality, the expense and the delays of the Law. He might be described as being violently and vituperatively on the side of the angels. The freedom of his invective, notably in the articles signed "Q," is beyond belief. Compared with his handling of ducal landlords, the most drastic criticisms of Mr. Lloyd George in his earlier days are as water to wine. At all costs Jerrold was determined that the Tory dogs should not have the best of it.



THE POOR MAN'S FRIEND
(The Hungry 'Forties)

Biographies of the *Punch* staff do not fall within the scope of this chronicle, but some knowledge of the record and the

temperament of the men who gave the paper its peculiar quality for many years is essential to a proper understanding of its influence on public opinion. They were humorous men, but they could be terribly in earnest, and they had abundant excuse for their seriousness. They could not forgive the Duke of Wellington when on August 24, 1841, he declared that England was "the only country in which the poor man, if only sober and industrious, was quite certain of acquiring a competency." They regarded it as "a heartless insult thrown in the idle teeth of famishing thousands, the ghosts of the victims of the Corn Laws.... If rags and starvation put up their prayer to the present Ministry, what must be the answer delivered by the Duke of Wellington? 'Ye are drunken and lazy!'" A few days later Mr. Fielden, M.P., moved "that the distress of the working people at the present time is so great throughout the country, but particularly in the manufacturing districts, that it is the duty of this House to make instant inquiry into the cause and extent of such distress, and devise means to remedy it; and at all events to vote no supply of money until such inquiry be made." The motion was negatived by 149 to 41, and a Tory morning paper complacently observed that "there has been for the last few days a smile on the face of every well-dressed gentleman, and of every well-to-do artisan, who wend their way along the streets of this vast metropolis. It is caused by the Opposition exhibition of Friday night in the House of Commons." The comment on this "spiteful imbecility" is not to be wondered at: "Toryism believes only in the well-dressed and the well-to-do. Purple and fine linen are the instrumental parts of her religion. Her faith is in

glossy raiment and a full belly." The Home Secretary stated in reply to a question, about a year later, that the keepers of St. James's Park were particularly ordered "not to admit persons who wore fustian jackets," an order which prompted *Punch* to remark that in Merry England "labour was ignominy, and your only man the man with white hands and filbert nails." A writer in the *Examiner* so recently as 1861 could remember the time when the sentries in St. James's Park used, at the point of the bayonet, according to their orders, to dismount women from their pattens, and make them trudge on with them in their hands. It is an old story; as old as the days of Ahasuerus, when "no one might enter the King's gate clothed with sackcloth." *Punch* never wearied of bringing home to his readers these abrupt contrasts of wealth and poverty. The people were crying for bread and Parliament had been occupied in carrying the Ventilation of the House Bill and the Royal Kitchen Garden Bill. The amount voted for the Royal Stables at Windsor was considerably more than three times what was obtained from Parliament for the education of the poor. *The Times* of December 2, 1841, quoted from the *Sporting Magazine* an account of the accommodation provided for the Prince Consort's beagles and Her Majesty's dogs—sleeping beds, compartments paved with asphalt, dry and clean, with roomy and healthy green yards; and boiling and distemper houses detached from the other portions of the building—and bracketed with it the sworn evidence of the late matron and medical attendant at the Sevenoaks Union. The lying-in ward was small and always looked dirty. "There had been six women there at one time: two were confined in one bed. It

was impossible entirely to shut out the infection. I have known fifteen children sleep in two beds." Six young girls, inmates of the Lambeth workhouse, were charged about the same time with breaking several panes of glass. In their defence they complained that they had been treated worse in the workhouse than they would be in prison, and said that it was to cause their committal to the latter place they broke the windows. Strange reading this in a comic journal, yet paralleled by similar extracts week after week and month after month. The birth of the Prince of Wales was chronicled in the same issue of the daily papers which contained the "luscious history" of the Lord Mayor's dinner:—

Fleshpots and Famine

Oh, men of Paisley—good folks of Bolton—what promise for ye is here! Turkeys, capons, sirloins, asparagus, pheasants, pineapples, Savoy cakes, Chantilly baskets, mince-pies, preserved ginger, brandy cherries, a thousand luscious cakes that "the sense aches at!" What are all these gifts of plenty but a glad promise that in the time of the "sweetest young prince," on the birthday of that Prince just vouchsafed to us, all England will be a large Lord Mayor's table!

When the question of the title of the next King was discussed, *Punch* boldly suggested Lazarus:—

Let Henry the Fifth have his Agincourt; let him, in history, sit upon a throne of Frenchmen's

skulls; our LAZARUS THE FIRST shall heal the wounds of wretchedness—shall gather bloodless laurels in the hospital and workhouse—his ermine and purple shall make fellowship with rags of linsey-wolsey—he shall be a king enthroned and worshipped in the hearts of the indigent!

LAZARUS THE FIRST! There is hope in the very sound for the wretched! There is Christian comfort to all men in the very syllables! By giving such a name to the greatest king of the earth, there is a shadowing forth and a promise of glorification to the beggars in eternity. Poverty and sores are anointed—tatters are invested with regality—man in his most abject and hopeless condition is shown his rightful equality with the bravest of the earth—royalty and beggary meet and embrace each other in the embrace of fraternity.

O ye thousands famished in cellars! O ye multitudes with hunger and cold biting with "dragon's tooth" your very vitals! shout, if you can find breath enough, "Long live Lazarus!"

In those days there was a "Pauper's Corner" in *Punch*, in which the cry of the people found frequent and touching utterance. We have quoted from "The Prayer of the People" as a heading to this chapter. Another short poem deserves

to be rescued from these old files, and added to the lyrics inspired by the Anti-Corn Law movement:—

Disease and want are sitting by my hearth—
The world hath left me nothing of its good!
The land hath not been stricken by a dearth,
And yet I am alone and wanting food.
The sparrow on the housetops o'er the earth
Doth find its sustenance, and surely HE
Who gave the mighty universe its birth
Would never love the wild bird more than me.

Punch had no illusions as to the genuineness of the Chartist movement, as may be gathered from his comments on the presentation of the Great Petition in 1842. There might, he owned, be dangerous demagogues who offered evil counsel, but the Chartists themselves had a degree of intelligence, a power of concentration, a knowledge of the details of public business, heretofore unknown to great popular combinations of dissentients:—

There are among the Chartists hard-headed logicians—men keenly alive to their sufferings, and what is more, soundly schooled as to the causes of them. We grant that their petition presented to Parliament contained many follies, very many extravagances—that it prayed for what the timidity of poverty will call revolutionary measures; but is it not an axiom in politics, that to get even a little it is necessary to ask a great deal?

We only call upon Toryism, or Whiggism either, each to show us its army of 3,000,000 of spotless politicians. But we contend that the Chartists are foully maligned when they are branded as thieves and spoilers. It is an old cry that property has its rights; it has been added—and well added—that property has also its duties. To these let us subjoin—property has also its cowardice.

Inquiries and investigations into the condition of agricultural labourers and of artisans were already bringing to light many disquieting facts. The physical destitution and spiritual forlornness of the workers in the Midlands were painfully illustrated in the evidence of Mr. Horne on the condition of the operatives of Wolverhampton:—

I have entered the houses and hovels of journeymen locksmiths and keymakers indiscriminately and unexpectedly, and seen the utmost destitution; no furniture in the room below but a broken board for a table, and a piece of plank laid across bricks for a seat; with the wife hungry—almost crying with hunger—and in rags, *yet the floor was perfectly clean*. I have gone upstairs, and seen a bed on the floor of a room seven feet long by six feet high at one side, but slanting down to nothing, like a wedge, where a husband, his wife and three children slept, and with no other article in the room of any kind whatever

except the bed.... William Benton—"Thinks that's his name; can't spell it rightly. Age, don't know justly—mother says he's turned eighteen. Can't read or write; can tell some of his letters. Goes to a Sunday school sometimes. Is of the Baptist school religion, *whatever that is*. Never heard of Moses; never heard of St. Paul. Has heard of Christ; knows who Jesus Christ was—he was Adam. Doesn't care much about going to school if he could.... "

You will find poor girls who have never sung or danced; never seen a dance; never read a book that made them laugh; never seen a violet or a primrose or other flowers; and others whose only idea of a green field was derived from *having been stung by a nettle*.

The Song of the Shirt

The Commission which had been engaged in learning the exact conditions of all the women and children employed in agriculture in England suggested to *Punch* an imaginary report of an inquiry into the state of the aristocracy, and the moral condition, employment, health, diet, etc., of the residents in Belgrave Square, most of the ladies examined being overworked by violent dancing in overheated rooms. Sweating in the cheap clothes trade was already attracting the notice of reformers, and *Punch* was on the warpath when a Jew slop-seller prosecuted a poor widow with two children for pawning articles which she had to make up for

him. She got 7d. a pair for making up trousers, and earned 7s. a week. It was this episode, exposed in the verses "Moses and Co.," which paved the way for Hood's immortal "Song of the Shirt," the greatest poem, the most noble contribution that ever appeared in the pages of Punch. It was printed in the Christmas number of 1843, and dwarfed all the other contributions to insignificance:—

THE SONG OF THE SHIRT

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt."

"Work! work! work!
While the cock is crowing aloof!
And work—work—work,
Till the stars shine through the roof!
It's O! to be a slave
Along with the barbarous Turk,
Where woman has never a soul to save,
If this is Christian work!

"Work—work—work
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work—work—work
Till the eyes are heavy and dim!

Seam and gusset and band,
Band and gusset and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep,
And sew them on in a dream!

"O men, with sisters dear!
O men, with mothers and wives!
It is not linen you're wearing out,
But human creatures' lives!
Stitch—stitch—stitch,
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once, with a double thread,
A shroud as well as a shirt.

"But why do I talk of Death,
That phantom of grisly bone?
I hardly fear his terrible shape,
It seems so like my own—
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep;
Oh God, that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!

"Work—work—work!
My labour never flags;
And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
A crust of bread—and rags.
That shatter'd roof—and this naked floor—
A table—a broken chair—
And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there!

190 A cab-runner was a street agent in late 19th-century London who solicited and directed passengers to horse-drawn cabs, often demanding fares or tips or using aggressive tactics; the practice declined as regulated taxicabs became common in the early 20th century.

191 The 'growler' was a contemporary nickname for a type of horse-drawn hackney carriage in Victorian and Edwardian London—an enclosed, four-wheeled cab for hire—frequently depicted in cartoons and gradually displaced by motor vehicles after 1900.

192 This refers to repeated 19th-century British parliamentary measures to permit a man to marry his deceased wife's sister; the prohibition was finally removed by the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act of 1907.

193 'Tommy Atkins' is a traditional generic name and personification for a common British soldier, widely used in cartoons, literature and popular speech from the 19th century onward.

194 A historical name for episodes of compulsive dancing or trance-like behavior recorded especially in southern Europe in the 15th–16th centuries, folk belief linking the condition to a spider (tarantula) bite and prescribing music and dancing as a cure.

195 Loie Fuller was an American dancer and stage innovator active around the 1890s–1910s, celebrated for her 'serpentine' dances and pioneering use of flowing silk costumes and coloured stage lighting.

196 Miss Maud Allan (1873–1956) was a Canadian-born dancer and actress noted for performing an interpretive "Salome" dance in the early 20th century, a performance that provoked public controversy and moral debate in Britain and elsewhere.

197 The Yellow Book was a British literary and artistic quarterly published in the 1890s (begun 1894) associated with aestheticism and 'fin-de-siècle' tastes and often criticised contemporaneously as emblematic of decadence.

198 A large, decorative women's hat worn to daytime theatre performances in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; its wide brims and tall ornamentation frequently obstructed the view of other audience members and led to restrictions or bans in some theatres (the text notes such prohibitions, e.g. in Ohio).

199 A lightweight straw hat, traditionally hand-woven in Ecuador but popularly associated with Panama; it became an internationally fashionable summer hat around the turn of the 20th century and provoked a short-lived craze often called 'Panamania'.

200 A verse drama by Alfred Lord Tennyson first published in 1858, written in an archaic, choric style; Punch is here alluding to a well-known lyric from that work.

201 The famous London waxworks museum founded by Marie Tussaud in the late 18th century, notable in Victorian and later times for life-size figures of historical and celebrity personages and popular public display.

202 The stanzaic form associated with Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem "Dolores" (1866); the phrase refers to the particular metrical and rhyming pattern Swinburne popularized in late-Victorian poetry.

203 A London bookseller and publishing house of the late 19th century (associated with John Lane), known for issuing fin-de-siècle periodicals and books including contributors to the aesthetic/decadent movements.

204 A short-lived but influential British literary quarterly (published 1894–1897) with a distinctive yellow cover, associated with aesthetic and decadent writers and often criticized or satirized by contemporaries.

205 A mid-19th-century British art movement (founded c. 1848) whose painters and poets sought a return to detailed, vivid styles and moral seriousness associated with art before Raphael; key figures included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt.

206 A celebrated reclining Venus painting by the Spanish master Diego Velázquez that hung in London's National Gallery and was famously attacked (slashed) by a militant suffragist in 1914, an event widely reported at the time.

207 An English illustrator and author of the 1890s associated with the Aesthetic and Decadent movements, known for striking black-and-white drawings and influential theatrical and book illustrations.

208 An official of the British royal household who, until the abolition of statutory theatre censorship in 1968, exercised formal powers to license and censor plays performed in the United Kingdom.

209 Originally a Parisian theatre (founded 1897) famed for short plays of shock, horror and macabre realism; productions and a Grand Guignol style were occasionally imported to London in the early 20th century.

210 A series of popular outdoor concert performances in London, begun in the 19th century and from 1895 directed by Sir Henry Wood; these concerts evolved into the modern annual 'Proms' tradition.

211 A British peer who publicly criticized Britain's neglect of the Olympic Games; in 1913 the title was held by Hugh Grosvenor, the 2nd Duke of Westminster, a prominent landowner and public figure of the time.

212 A town on the River Seine northwest of Paris where rowing and regatta events were sometimes held; the text refers to an international boat race there in the 1890s.

213 An English writer, poet and well-known rowing enthusiast of the late 19th century who contributed verses and commentary on university and amateur rowing.

214 The name given to a series of yachts Sir Thomas Lipton entered as challengers for the America's Cup; Lipton launched several boats called Shamrock during his attempts to win the trophy.