

John Seed

Also by John Seed:

Spaces In (Pig Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1977)

History Labour Night. Fire & Sleet & Candlelight (Pig Press, Durham 1984)

Transit Depots (Ship of Fools, London 1993)

Interior in the Open Air (Reality Street, London 1993)

Divided into One (Poetical Histories, Cambridge 2003)

New & Collected Poems (Shearsman, Exeter 2005)

—— John Seed ——

Pictures From Mayhew

London 1850



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The illustrations in this volume are all drawn from Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*.

For the student of history.



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NOTE: Every word in the pages that follow is drawn from Henry Mayhew's writings on London published in the *Morning Chronicle* from 1849 to 1850, then in 63 editions of his own weekly paper, *London Labour and the London Poor* between December 1850 and February 1852 and then in the four volume work of the same title. The visual images are taken from the latter. An afterword provides further information.

JS



A cab-driver

PREFACE I

If you was to go to
the raffle tonight sir they'd say
directly you come in who's this
here swell what's he want they'd
think you were a cad or
spy come from the police but
they'd treat you civilly some would
fancy you was a fast kind
of a gentleman come there for
a lark but you need have
no fear though the pint pots
does fly about sometimes

PREFACE II

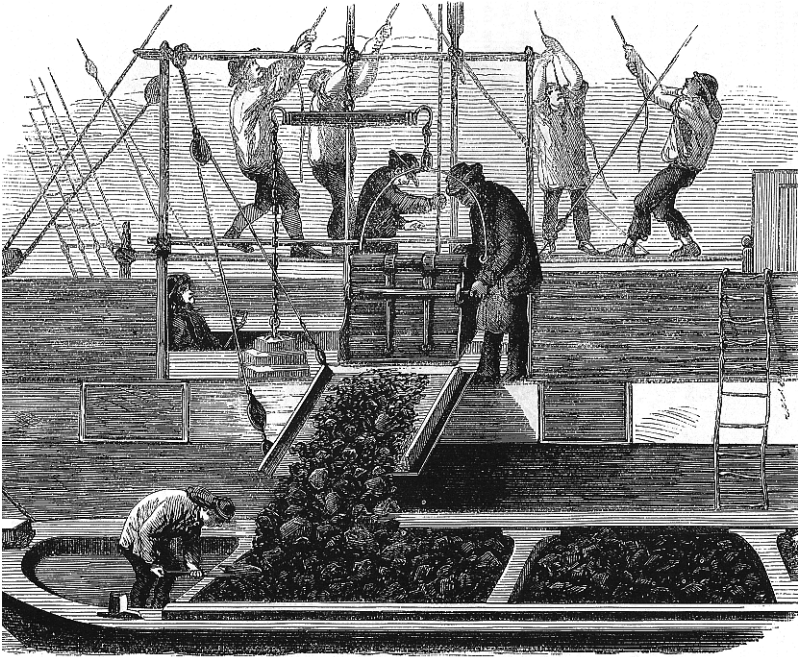
I know who you are well enough

take you for? why
for a bloody
spy you

here from the Secretary of
State you know you do

to see
how many men I've got in the
house & what kind they are by

God if you ain't soon mizzled I'll
crack your bloody skull open for you



Coal-heavers

I

1

It's no use asking for it
if you wish to keep it
unless you can
lift a horse up
when he's down

2

it's the devil's place of
all you ever saw in your life
standing there before them retorts
with a long heavy rake
pullin out the red-hot coke for the bare life
the rake red-hot in your hands
& the hiss in & the bubblin of the water
& the smoke & the smell
it's fit to melt a man like a
roll of fresh butter

3

as we go up the ladder we
very often scrunch our teeth the work's
so hard the coal keeps us from
biting the tongue that's one use the
other is by rolling it along in
the mouth it excites the spittle moistens
the mouth all I want when I'm
at work is a bit of coal

4

We carry the coals in sacks
of 2 cwt. the sack usually weighs
from 14 lb. to 20 lb. so our load
is mostly 238 lb. we carry up
a ladder from the hold of
the ship 16 to 20 feet
deep over four barges over planks
to the waggon 60 to 80
feet with the sacks on our
backs each man will ascend this
height & travel this distance 90
times in a day he will
lift himself with 2 cwt. of coals
on his back 1,460 feet or
upwards a quarter of a mile
high three times the height of
St. Paul's in 12 hours &
besides will travel 6,300 feet or
1¼ mile carrying the same weight
as he goes the labour is
very hard even the strongest cannot
continue for three days together

5

a black nigger slave
was never slaved as I was
I've worked all night
when it's been very moonlight
loading a barge

& I've worked until three
& four in the morning
& then me & another man
slept an hour or two in a
shed as joined his stables
& then must go at it again
I hadn't a rag left to my back
everything was worn to bits
in such hard work
& then I got the sack

6

When I goes
home I just
smokes a pipe
& goes to
bed that's all

II

I sell chickeed & grunsell &
turfs for larks a few nettles
that's ordered they're for tea I
gets chickweed at Chalk Farm out
of the public fields every morning
about seven I goes for it
the grunsell a gentleman gives leave
to get out of his garden
down Battle-bridge way in the
Chalk-road leading to Holloway I
gets there every morning about nine
I gets the nettles at Highgate
after I've gathered my things enough
of each to make up a
dozen halfpenny bunches I puts them
in my basket slings 'em at
my back & starts round London
Low Marrabun I goes to always
of a Saturday & Wednesday I
goes to St. Pancras on a
Tuesday I visit Clerkenwell & Russell
Square & round about there on
a Monday I goes down about
Covent Garden & the Strand on
a Thursday I does High Marrabun
on a Friday I say chickweed
& grunsell as I goes along
I don't say for young singing

birds I'm out in usual till
about five in the evening I
never stop to eat I'm walking
all the time 15 miles every
day of my life I has
my breakfast afoore I starts &
my tea when I comes home

III

1

Mother's been dead a long time
Father gets drunk
sometimes but I think
not so oft as he did

& then he lies in bed
gets up & gets more drink
& goes to bed again

two or three days
& nights at a time

he never uses me badly
when he's drinking
& has money he gives me some

now & then
to get bread & butter with
or a halfpenny pudding
he never eats anything

in the house
when he's drinking
he's a very quiet man

2

when I've been at the worst
I've been really glad I hadn't no one
depending on me

I've smoked a pipe
when I was troubled in mind
& couldn't get a meal

but if I'd had a young daughter now
what good would it have been
my smoking a pipe to comfort her?

when there's others
as you must love
what must it be then?

3

a scurf what he earned
I never knew he gave
me what he liked sometimes
nothing in May last he
gave me 2s. 8d. for the
whole month & two children
they trembled when they heard
his step I can't tell how
we lived then some days
that May we had neither
bite nor sup the water
was too bad to drink
cold they were afraid of

their lives he knocked them
about so drink made him
a savage took the father
out of him his children
was starving but I durstn't
say that aloud when
his mates was by

4

Then I was always thirsty
& when I got up
of a morning I used
to go stalking round
to the first public-house
was open my mouth was
dry parched as if burning
a fever I was ashamed to
be seen out clothes ragged
shoes take the water in
one end let it out the
other I keep my old
rags at home to remind
me I call them the
regimentals of the guzzler

5

Bad as I'm off now
if I had only
a careful partner I
wouldn't want for anything

6

A friend gave me half
a sovereign to bury my
child the parish provided me
a coffin it cost me
about 3s. besides we didn't
have her taken away from
here not as a parish
funeral exactly I agreed that
if he would fetch it
& let it stand in
an open place near his
shop until the Saturday which
was the time I would
give the undertaker 3s. to
let a man come with
a pall to throw over
the coffin so it should
not be seen it was
a parish funeral I had
to give 1s. 6d. for a
pair of shoes before I
could follow my child to
the grave & we paid
1s. 9d. for rent all out
of the half sovereign

IV

1

At Woolwich we were all on the fuddle
at the Dust Hole I went to beg
of a Major whose brother was in Spain
he'd himself been out I said I
was a sergeant in the 3rd Westminster Grenadiers
you know & served under your brother oh
yes that's my brother's regiment says he where
was you then on the 16th of October
why sir I was at the taking of
the city of Irun says I in fact
I was with the costermongers in St. Giles's
calling cabbages white heart cabbages oh then said
he what day was Ernani taken on why
said I a little tipsy & bothered at
the question that was the 16th of October
too very well my man says he tapping
his boots with a riding whip I'll see
what I can do for you the words
were no sooner out of his mouth when
he stepped up to me & gave me
a regular pasting he horsewhipped me up &
down stairs along the passages my flesh was
like sassage I managed at last to open
the door & get away

2

I became a turnpike sailor & went out
as one of the Shallow Brigade wearing Guernsey
shirt & drawers or tattered trowsers there was
a school of four we only got a
tidy living 16s or £1 a day among
us we used to call every one that
came along coalheavers & all sea-fighting captains
now my noble sea-fighting captain we used
to say fire an odd shot from your
larboard locker to us Nelson's bull-dogs but
mind we never tried that dodge on at
Greenwich for fear of the old geese the
Shallow got so grannied in London the supplies
got queer shipwrecks got so common in the
streets I quitted the land navy

3

In wet weather I used to dress tidy
& very clean for the respectable broken-down
tradesman or reduced gentleman caper I wore a
suit of black generally & a clean dickey
& sometimes old black kid gloves & I
used to stand with a paper before my
face as if ashamed:

TO A HUMANE PUBLIC
I HAVE SEEN BETTER DAYS

This is called standing pad with a fakement
it's a wet-weather dodge & isn't

so good as screeving but I did middling
& can't bear being idle

4

I've done the shivering dodge too gone out
in the cold weather half naked one man
can't get off shivering now Shaking Jemmy went
on with his shivering so long he couldn't
help it at last he shivered like a jelly
like a calf's foot with the ague on
the hottest day in summer it's a good
dodge in tidy inclement seasons it's not so
good a lurk by two bob a day
as it once was it's a single-handed job
if one man shivers less than another he
shows it isn't so cold as the good
shiverer makes it out then it's no go