

The Key of the Street

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Peter Blake, *George Augustus Sala and the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: The Personal Style of a Public Writer* (Ashgate, 2015), 286 pp., \$119.95 cloth.

Mary L. Shannon, *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street*, The Nineteenth Century Series (Ashgate, 2015) xvi + 261 pp., \$119.95 cloth.

The title of George Augustus Sala's first article in Dickens' *Household Words* points to the connections between urban life, Victorian print culture, and the rapidly evolving nature and role of the periodical press in the middle decades of the nineteenth century that are the focus of both of these two books. In their exploration of these subjects, both Peter Blake's *George Augustus Sala* and Mary L. Shannon's *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street* make extensive use of a wide range of visual materials, and both authors, Shannon especially, have been well-served by their publisher in the quantity and quality of the images they are able to include. The most basic difference between the two authors' approaches, however, is encapsulated in their very divergent readings of the one illustration that they have in common: Cruikshank's vignette for the title page of *Sketches by Boz*, which shows the artist and Dickens ascending in a balloon, waving flags to a cheering crowd that watches them from the ground below. For Blake the illustration reveals "writer and illustrator, rising above the clouds in a hot-air balloon viewing all things together

and comprehensively” (20). For Shannon, by contrast, it renders “Boz-as-showman, a spectacle himself in a city of spectacles” (136), suggesting “the material connections between audience and reader” and the role of fiction in “bringing people together from many different places into one small, localized network” (131). Blake focuses upon the individual creator of the text, and for him Cruikshank’s illustration becomes an emblem of the dynamic between written and visual texts, something he argues is central to a full understanding of Sala’s career. Shannon, while providing extended discussions of the three authors named in her title, is more broadly interested in the relationships between place, print, and cultural formation, and her focus is upon the discourse networks for which Wellington Street stands as an exemplar. The one book is thus a conventional study of a single figure, the other an exploration of more complex cultural dynamics. While both projects provide and explore much new material, ultimately Shannon’s approach is the more fertile and offers a richer reading of the ways in which Victorian print culture was produced and consumed.

A full-length study of Sala is indeed a welcome addition to our understanding of the Victorian press, given the dearth of critical attention he has hitherto received. Ralph Straus’s 1942 biography and P.D. Edwards’ 1997 discussion of Sala along with Edmund Yates, both Dickens’ “young men,” have been the only previous monographs on one of the more intriguing lesser luminaries of nineteenth-century journalism. Pending the appearance of Catherine Waters’ ongoing project on Sala’s role as a special correspondent, most contemporary considerations of Sala have come as incidental to the main focus of their projects: Patrick Leary’s valuable account of the *Punch* leadership group’s declining to invite him to join their circle over questions about his moral and social standing, for example, or Joel Wiener’s placing him within the context of an emergent transatlantic press. In the absence of an established critical conversation, then, Blake’s project represents a significant opportunity to redefine his subject and establish its importance for our understanding of Victorian print culture.

The book is arranged into seven chapters: beginning with an account of Sala's temporary blindness as a child, Blake then explores his early career as a miniature painter, railway planner, and scene painter, arguing that these years and the influence of Hogarth and Cruikshank in particular were foundational to the later development of his journalistic perspective and distinctive prose style. From here Blake moves to chapters on Sala's work for Dickens at *Household Words* in the 1850s, contrasting his representations of London, the quintessentially modern city "chaotically out of control yet strangely organized, all-consuming and forever restless" (96), with those of the far more Bohemian Paris and its "love of revolution and violence, its monstrous consumption and its joy of spectacle" (108). A brief discussion of his formative journey to Russia in 1856 as an experimental special correspondent for *Household Words* comes next and is followed by an extended account of Sala's fiction. Wisely, perhaps, Blake is not concerned with making a case for the recovery of these long forgotten novels. Rather, he shows how the influence of sensation fiction and the work of Balzac and Theophile Gautier helped shape the prose style of Sala's journalism of the 1860s through the 1880s, the decades in which he was at his most influential in his role as special correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, the subject of Chapter 6. The book concludes with the most extended discussion to date of Sala and pornography, examining his production of erotic material and showing how, even though the *Telegraph* for which he wrote was a voice of conventional rectitude, Sala himself may well have sympathized with the "flagellant columns" that appeared in such mainstream venues as the *Family Herald* and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*.

Readers both new to Sala and those more familiar with his work will find much of interest and value in Blake's account. His discussion of Sala's early career and exploration of his visual style is illuminating for an understanding of the later tensions in his prose between reportage and the highly florid language for which he was frequently criticized. Similarly, the chapters on London and Paris provide new insights into the ways in which these contrasting models of rapid Victorian urbanization embody

very different versions of modernism and social control. Blake is especially good on Sala's punning interest in the connection between his own initials and the gas that, illuminating the new London cityscape, simultaneously ancient and modern, emblemizes the tension between hope for the future and a fear that urban modernity is increasingly beyond individual control (82-83). Building on these two accounts, Blake's discussion of Sala's time in Russia is particularly valuable for its discussion of his exposure to the serf system, and this chapter anticipates one of the book's most telling sections – its exploration of Sala's growing sympathy with the pro-slavery climate that emerged in England during the run-up to the American Civil War and that had its origins in the emergence of scientific racism. Challenging material though this be, Blake addresses it directly and shows how closely Sala was aligned with and spoke for the “more imperialist, jingoist, and racist notion of Englishness” (204) that emerged in the 1860s and that was epitomized by the affair of Governor Eyre. There is, then, much of interest and value here.

At the same time, the book presents some significant challenges to the reader both in its methods and its form. For example, Blake early states an intent to move away from the biographical emphasis of previous studies of Sala and a goal of replacing this with “a sustained effort to encapsulate his style and the theories underpinning his writing.” But the book seems consistently inconsistent in just how biographical it wishes to be: on the one hand, whole tracts of Sala's life and experience are left untouched, even as we are told repeatedly that Sala “must have” reacted to something in a way Blake specifies for us, but without providing any evidence to support his claim. The reader unfamiliar with Sala's life will thus frequently be unsure of how to contextualize Blake's interpretations of the work and of how to appraise his biographical claims. In this respect, Chapter 7 is particularly challenging, since its account of Sala's engagement with pornography seems intrinsically biographical in its focus, makes little connection with his prose voice, and only tangentially links its topic to the wider periodical press. The tenuous connection here points to a larger question over the degree to which a book more focused

upon an individual figure than the field of periodical studies as a whole is able to prove its claims for Sala's influence upon the evolution of the nineteenth-century press and, in particular, the emergence of New Journalism. With its focus primarily upon close accounts of specific samples of his work, the chapters do not place him as effectively within the wider context of the press as one might have wished – the balloon ascends, but Blake keeps our gaze fixed upon the man in the basket.

Finally, the Cruikshank illustration and the uncertain way in which it is managed points to a wider pattern of missed opportunities for a stronger editorial hand in the production of this text. Most basically, copy-editing should have done more to clarify citations, ensure consistency in the spelling of authors' names, reduce reliance upon the passive voice, cut down upon adverbial editorializing, and resolve issues of grammar and punctuation. More significantly, stronger editorial work might have addressed numerous points where individual paragraphs become unglued (25-26, for instance, or 66-67) or where the ongoing discussion could be condensed – the listing of the digital resources available for periodical studies (7) seems redundant, for example, as does the level of detail in the plot summaries of Sala's justifiably obscure novels that are the subject of Chapter 5. Indeed, Blake's reference to the balloon illustration for *Sketches by Boz* epitomizes the issue: on the one hand, and unlike the citation in Shannon, he accurately references the later edition of collected pieces for which Cruikshank first provided this new title vignette; on the other, he undermines himself by claiming that it was produced "for the monthly parts" (20), the serial form in which many of Dickens' later novels indeed did appear, but not the vehicle that applies here. With these reservations, however, Blake's book has brought a new level of attention to one of the more intriguing figures of nineteenth-century letters and will prove valuable not only to readers interested in Sala himself but to scholars of the Victorian press, culture, and counter-culture.

Mary Shannon's *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street* is a remarkable, innovative project that examines this small thoroughfare between the Strand and

Covent Garden that was in the 1840s and early 1850s home to more than twenty newspapers and periodicals and more than a dozen booksellers or publishers – and, incidentally, to George Augustus Sala. Focused upon “how the writers of Wellington Street themselves conceived of their community of readers, and the ways in which the cultural geography of Wellington Street informed their representation of their imagined readers as part of the network” (7), the book explores how the shared print culture proximity thus created “reinforced the sense of participation in an active and recognizable community of print networks for Dickens and his contemporaries” (11). A Londoner herself and the product of King’s College, which was founded in 1829 just along the Strand from the street that became her subject, Shannon brings to her project both the passion of an enthusiast and a deep grounding in the various iterations of network theory that have emerged in both literary studies and the social sciences over the past decade or so. Combined with these qualities is her remarkable and impressive range of primary research: maps and city plans; local government archives; Post Office and other directories; playbills; illustrations from periodicals and serialized fiction; even images of *papier mâché* models of contemporary buildings. Together, these various elements produce a book striking in its richness and for the new ways in which it helps us understand early and mid-Victorian print culture.

Borrowing from Hogarth’s *The Four Times of Day* for her structuring pattern, Shannon organizes her project unusually but creatively, with her first three chapters defined for phases of the day and the evolving life of the street. Chapter 1, “Morning: ‘The Smallness of the World,’” establishes the density of the print networks and the rivalry that was fuelled by the very proximity to one another of competing journals and editors, notably between Reynolds and Dickens – the latter could, quite literally, look out of his office window and see in a building across the way the very man whose work was the object of his vituperative “A Preliminary Word” in the opening issue of *Household Words*. Chapter 2, “Afternoon: ‘Dissolute and Idle Persons,’” builds from this with an account of how Wellington Street both included Mayhew’s work to reveal

the squalid underside of Victorian progress and also enabled Reynolds to place himself "at the heart of London's radical print networks" (70) and facilitated his connecting political action in person as well as in the pages of both his newspapers and *The Mysteries of London*. With Chapter 3, "Evening: 'The Showman Introduces Himself,'" Shannon shifts her focus to the part played in the Street by the Lyceum Theatre, which stood at its intersection with the Strand, directly across from Dickens' *Household Words* office and which connected "audience, actors, characters, readers, illustrators, and writers" (145) into another constantly shifting network that brought print and journalism together with the codes of the melodramatic stage. For Shannon, the theatre becomes a larger representation of urban life, "as the illusion of modernity and anonymity is slowly punctured by the way individual faces start to stand out from the crowd, and the face-to-face community is revealed as still there, hiding behind the surface" (154). The book's final chapter, "Night: 'The Compass of the World and They That Dwell Therein,'" appears to continue the titular trope of its predecessors but in fact takes the project in a very different direction, as Shannon argues that the print culture of Wellington Street was exported to Australia in the persons of R.H. Horne and, later, Marcus Clarke. Reproducing itself through its influence on Collins Street in Melbourne, she suggests, "London print culture is used to bolster Melbourne's fledgling papers and periodicals" (173) and "metropolitan and colonial writers, editors, and readers are drawn together by these connections into a vast network of print" (211).

Such an innovative design, range of material, and novelty of approach inevitably brings its challenges. At times, the density of the trees does indeed threaten to obscure the wood as the sheer volume of rich material overwhelms the larger point. More importantly, Shannon's methodology with its focus upon this one street between 1843 and 1853 does beg some intriguing questions: spatially, what is excluded by the necessary limitation of focusing tightly upon this one location? As she recognizes, during the period of her study, Dickens briefly had another professional address – that of the *Daily News* on Fleet Street – and this in fact preceded

his time on Wellington Street. Chronologically, how firmly can the networks be delineated since Dickens lived outside England for a substantial portion of Shannon's chosen period and does not actually date a letter from the Wellington Street office until May 1851, more than a year after *Household Words* first appeared? And indeed, what becomes of Wellington Street itself after the period of her study, 1843-53? Finally, as Shannon herself acknowledges, and can only partially address, what is lost by the omission of women that results from her focus upon the lived, public interactions upon which the networked Street depended – interactions that were public, largely among men and thus excluded the emerging significance of professional women authors, as evidenced, for example, by Dickens' concerted efforts to recruit women to contribute to *Household Words* from its very founding?

Rather like that well-known earlier Dickensian creation, however, these are the questions of a reader asking for more. For Shannon has given us an elegantly written, richly researched account that is both fascinating and thought-provoking in itself and that suggests important future lines of research in the field. Like the view from Cruikshank's balloon, then, it offers us a new perspective on the urban landscape and the emerging print cultures that it surveys. As a worthy winner of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals 2016 Colby Prize, it will be invaluable to scholars throughout nineteenth-century studies.

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