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Representing the Wandering Poor in
Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, Cambridge,
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Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

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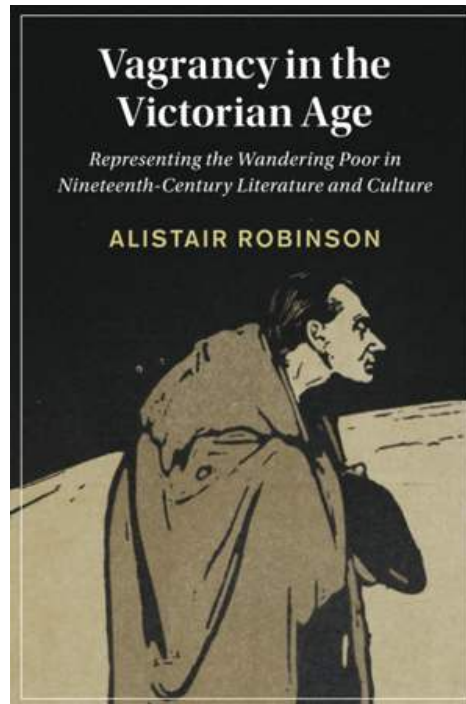
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1 *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age*, originally a PhD thesis, aims to be a cross-disciplinary study featuring a large corpus of written and visual documents, canonical, ephemeral, and popular, taking into account factors such as class, gender, race, and environment. It is, as the author indicates in the introduction, part of a 'growing body of work on the literary and cultural representation of vagrancy in Britain'. It consists of 228 pages of text and footnotes, 21 pages of bibliography, and a practical index that includes concepts as well as names of people and places.

2 The study combines solid factual analysis with the more subjective question of representation in print and in the popular imagination. The cross-disciplinary dimension proves very successful. The

literary references range from famous figures such as Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, H. G. Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, Frances Trollope and Harriet Martineau to less well-known sources. As often in Victorian studies, there is a close link between literary production and the social and political issues of the day. This connection is explored throughout *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age*, which rests upon a comprehensive and ambitious backdrop of both history and history of ideas. The demographics of the vagrant population, as well as their legal rights—which were strongly impacted by the 1824 Vagrancy Act—are highlighted, as is the imperial context. Biography is judiciously combined with the history of thought, for instance through the use of correspondence. Five black and white illustrations, ranging from engravings and period photographs to the front pages of periodicals, add to the scope of the study.

3 The book is divided into three sections of two chapters each, which can for the most part be read independently: country, city, and frontier. This choice of geographical structure makes it possible to identify and focus on different types of vagrants: gypsies, hawkers, handicraft tramps and vagrant poachers; casual paupers and city loafers; immigrant vagrants, American Indians and beachcombers of the Pacific islands. Chapter 1 focuses on itinerants, principally gypsies, referencing and building upon a convincing range of primary sources—essays and periodicals—as well as more recent studies such as *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807-1930* (Deborah Nord, Columbia University Press, 2006). Chapter 2, on poachers, examines legislation, before moving on to colourful personal testimonies and the ambivalent perceptions of poaching in the collective imagination, from a 'national pastime' to a morally objectionable activity. It reviews the impact of Hannah More's pamphlet *Black Giles, the Poacher* (1796), and sheds light upon Will Fern, the vagrant poacher in Charles Dickens's *The Chimes* (1844). Alistair Robinson argues that, despite the overall consensus regarding the radical dimension of Dickens's novel, the character of the poacher, possibly the most radical symbol, is often overlooked by critics. Chapter 3, on casual paupers, contains the



expected references to the New Poor Law (1834), but also delves into a wealth of primary sources, from periodicals to personal investigations and testimonies, largely from the 1860s, but sometimes dated as late as Mary Higgs's *Glimpses into the Abyss* (1906). Many social novels, notably those of Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley, are also discussed in chapter 3. It is perhaps a pity that there are only two token mentions of Elizabeth Gaskell in the volume, and none in chapter 3, as her influential novels deal with the condition of England and feature vagrant characters such as Esther in *Mary Barton*.

- 4 Chapter 4, on loafers, grapples with the notion of idleness—a central concern in Victorian times—and fears of insurrectional tendencies. The work of statistician and social reformer Charles Booth is referenced, in particular the distinction he established between two different types of paupers (class A, the more hopeless, including street-sellers and criminals, and class B, starving casual labourers). Once again, Alistair Robinson analyses both the history of social and political thought (including reflections on the social problem and eugenics) and the related literary production of the time, with a special focus on H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Chapter 5, on paupers, vagabonds and American Indians, explores colonial and immigration issues, once again combining facts drawn from recent and reliable secondary sources with the study of primary sources, from periodicals and novels to travelogues and diaries. Chapter 6, the shortest chapter, on beachcombers, tackles yet another fresh set of issues, related to islands in the Pacific. What was at stake there for the British Empire was very different from North America, since some islands were places of imprisonment and containment, while many escaped from control and integration. The beachcomber comes across as a striking figure, as do his representations in print, from periodicals to novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide* (1894).
- 5 Overall, *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age* uncovers a thought-provoking tension between the idealisation of vagrants as figures of freedom and adventure, and their demonisation through an association with disorder and degeneration. For instance, it shows how the poet Charles Lamb provocatively viewed them as the embodiment of liberty, and how Robert Louis Stevenson looked longingly at the life of beachcombers in Polynesia ('I should have been a beachcomber. I should have gone fifteen years ago to Samoa', he wrote in a letter quoted on page 206). Conversely, vagrants were negatively associated with the figure of the savage. Their tendency to move to territories that were not yet controlled by any major imperial power was viewed with scorn. In urban Britain, they were often at the heart of the attempt to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Their extinction was predicted, sometimes even wished for, through incarceration or even sterilisation.
- 6 The debate is skilfully explored, in conjunction with key concepts of the period, such as the 'Condition of England question', eugenics, and social Darwinism. The terminology and discourse are successfully analysed to demonstrate the prejudice and bias of contemporary authors and audiences. More attention might have been devoted to female vagrants, in particular fallen women, who, like Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, receive only glancing mentions. Overall, the relatively short volume is well written and engaging, with a story-telling dimension. The final chapter, in particular, which deals with beachcombers in the Pacific, takes the reader on a fascinating journey of discovery through the experiences of travellers and locally famous figures.