

The Literary London Journal



Review

Albert Smith, editor. *Gavarni in London: Sketches of Life and Character with Illustrative Essays by Popular Writers (1849)*. Edited with an Introduction by Stephen Banks. 2009.

Hardback. 244 pages. 23 b/w illustrations by Paul Gavarni. Lambertville, NJ: Truebill Press. ISBN: 978-0979111648. \$45.00

Reviewed by

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The Literary London Journal, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013)

Gavarni in London is a 2009 facsimile edition of a collection of London sketches illustrated by French engraver Paul Gavarni. The sketches and accompanying illustrations were first published as a magazine series in 1848 and then collected in a volume edited by essayist and journalist Albert Smith. These sketches were contributed by prominent journalists of the day and then subsequently illustrated by Gavarni. Stephen Banks, a lecturer in criminal law and legal history at the University of Reading, has edited the current edition, providing extensive footnotes and a scholarly introduction as well as a clean and corrected text.

As Banks's introduction tells us, the volume's illustrator, Paul Gavarni (born Guillaume Sulpice Chevalier in Paris in 1804) became well known in France through the fashion plates he contributed to *La Mode* and other fashion magazines and then for the thousand or more lithographs he created for *Le Charivari* between 1836 and 1848. He also illustrated the novels of Balzac, who became one of his greatest advocates. Work for the *Illustrated London News* brought him a more substantial reputation among English readers. So by the time he travelled to London in 1847, Banks asserts, 'his reputation was at its very apogee' (14), which would perhaps explain his selection as the illustrator of the series of sketches in this volume.

Although the essays were apparently written first and focus on subjects chosen by their authors, it is Gavarni's 23 illustrations created to accompany each essay that give the volume coherence and, as Smith must have expected given the title he chooses, would contribute to its popularity. Among the better known of the volume's ten contributors of

literary sketches are Albert Smith himself, who is responsible for eight of the sketches, Shirley Brooks, a regular contributor to and later editor of *Punch*, and J. Stirling Coyne, one of the original editors of *Punch* and later drama critic for *The Times*. Many of the contributors have some association with the London stage, either as playwrights or critics, perhaps not surprising given Albert Smith's subsequent career as an actor-dramatist. The contributors are noticeably all male and the tone of the volume, though not perhaps of every piece, is very much that of *flânerie*, for the most part a male activity and perspective in this moment.

Banks's claim for the value of reprinting this particular collection is that it offers contemporary readers a view of the 'attitudes and dispositions of the comfortably situated Victorian classes' (10). That claim is justified not only by the identities of the contributors to the volume, most of whom were 'commercial and popular writers' (Banks 11), known to readers for their association with major middle-class periodicals such as *Punch*, but also by the topics of the sketches, most of them focused on aspects of London life familiar to middle-class residents of the city. So, sketches discuss such topics as 'The Opera', 'Music in the Drawing Room', 'Marriage in High Life', 'The Lounger in Regent Street', 'A Sketch from the West End'. Those sketches that turn their attention to the lives of London's poor, criminal, and working classes, 'The Crossing Sweeper', 'The Bar Maid', 'The Orange Seller', 'The Street Beggar' and 'Thieves' among others, view them largely as they might be observed at work or in the street as characters at the margins of middle class life and consciousness, seen in passing as the *flâneur* might observe them. This is most distinctly not another *London Labour and London Poor*; the volume's contributors have neither Mayhew's desire to meet the poor on their own turf and on their own terms, nor are they motivated by a spirit of social reform or a desire to force the middle classes to attend to the squalor and social injustice all around them. Rather, they most often reaffirm the comfortable certainties of middle-class life and mirror – often with wit and sometimes with irony – middle-class values and attitudes. Banks is at pains throughout his introduction to assert that these writers 'were not revolutionaries' and that their purpose was clearly to 'amuse rather than outrage or threaten' (23).

The brief literary sketches themselves do seem to aim in general for lightness, wit and a sense that the writer and reader are both *au courant* with the doings of London life and society and have a shared knowledge of people, places and events of the capital city. That they were writing ephemera, something very much for the moment, seems to be the consensus of the writers. Their interest for a contemporary reader or scholar might be in the insight offered into several aspects of this particular moment in London life. Written on the cusp of mid-century, many of these sketches, Banks suggests, give a sense of a London in transition, hovering just on the brink of modernity with the old London still very much a part of people's experience. Three years before the Great Exhibition, these writers invoke a Georgian London where people sought their amusements in Vauxhall Gardens, where a trip to the theatre at Sadler's Wells offered a clear view of London over green fields, and where orange sellers still greeted theatre-goers in Drury Lane. Yet, they also anticipate an expanding and modern London served by railways and telegraph lines and shaped by rapid building and expansion westward beyond no-longer fashionable Bloomsbury.

Not unsurprisingly, the volume is permeated by a consciousness of comparison – and tension – between English and French culture. Perhaps in anticipation of the French eye and pen that would attempt to render in images what they have drawn in words, these London writers created essays full of French phrases, often badly constructed if Banks's note about the need to correct the French is to be believed. French references, French characters and comparisons between things English and French are frequent. 'The two sides of the Street [Oxford]', remarks the author of 'The Crossing Sweeper', 'were almost as foreign to each other at that time [before paving] as the opposite sides of the

British channel' (104). In 'Foreign Gentleman in London', Shirley Brooks compares the smooth and 'glittering hollowness' (227) of the French gentleman's success with the ladies in an English drawing room to the ineptness and pedantry and 'sulky hollowness' of his countryman in the same setting – all empty social gestures quickly forgotten but one so much more decorative than the other. Though, by the time Brooks finishes his essay anticipating how Gavarni will render his countryman as compared to Brooks's own rendering, the barb behind his words seems rather plain. Victorian reviewers of the volume seem to have found Gavarni's images insufficiently English in character. One reviewer in *John Bull* saw his images as 'French rather than English, both in expression and character' (18-19), while *The Literary Examiner* apparently complained that the sketches 'Frenchified[sic] sadly' (19).

Banks's introduction to the volume includes brief biographies of both Smith and Gavarni as well as his own take on the cultural work the volume is – and is not – doing. Along with the more than 300 footnotes identifying people, places and things mentioned in the essays, these tools make this somewhat quirky volume far more intelligible and useable. For the contemporary student or scholar of early Victorian London, the volume will not offer particularly new or unfamiliar information, but as a glimpse into the attitudes and consciousness of the 'those vigorous classes who', as Banks describes them, 'were to lead the city through a period of unparalleled social and technological development' (34) the volume is certainly worth reprinting. Gavarni's illustrations, almost always of people rather than cityscapes even when a place is the subject of the essay, do seem in some subtle ways to be offering their own outsider's commentary on London life in this moment and are of interest in their own right and in the dialogue they stage with the English essays they accompany.

To Cite This Article:

Wendy Kolmar, 'Review of Albert Smith, editor. *Gavarni in London: Sketches of Life and Character with Illustrative Essays by Popular Writers (1849)*. Edited with an Introduction by Stephen Banks.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2012/kolmar.pdf>.

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The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

The Literary London Journal is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>