

**SONGS, SATIRE AND CITY LIFE:
PRO-URBAN POPULAR TRADITIONS IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN¹**

PENELOPE J. CORFIELD
Royal Holloway, University of London; and
Newcastle University – UK

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The pro-town tradition in British popular culture has often been underrated by historians and cultural theorists. Raymond Williams, for example, agreed that it was possible to see the city as a source of civilisation but concluded that it was instead nothing more than the key locational centre of an exploitative capitalism.² His

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² R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; St. Albans, 1975), pp. 348, 363-5. Williams

analysis, which drew upon powerful literary critiques, tended to see town life as atomistic and dangerous. Urban residents by implication dragged out unpleasant lives in unpleasant environments. His view reflected an anti-town attitude that has had its own prolonged tradition in both Britain and America.³

This essay, by contrast, does not take such a straightforwardly pessimistic view. There was much more to the urban experience than exploitation. Town populations were far from mere ciphers. They created their own meanings and way-of-life, both in good times and in adversity. There were positive aspects to be celebrated.

Pro-urbanism meant that urban growth had supporters as well as critics. Examples can be found across Europe, where many countries had long experience of town life. In the case of Britain, the process of urbanisation from the mid-seventeenth-century onwards was a long-sustained process, not a sudden catastrophe.⁴ If some disliked urban life and preferred the countryside, others took the contrary view. These pro-urbanists enjoyed the vivacity and stimulus afforded by life among crowds.

described himself as a village boy and an urban outsider (ibid., p. 15).

³ See e.g. M.G. and L. White, *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, 1964).

⁴ P.J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982).

I was surprized at the place, but more at the people. They possessed a vivacity I had never beheld. I had been among dreamers but now I saw men awake. Their very step along the street showed alacrity.

So ran William Hutton's celebrated account of Birmingham, recording how impressed he was upon his first arrival there in 1741.⁵ Towns were places of life and energy. People there kept their eyes open; and newcomers were well advised to do the same.

Speed was a component of modern urbanity. The larger the city, the more rapid the pace at which people walked about – on average, of course. Things were visibly 'on the go'. And another indicator of urban animation was the characteristic speed of wit and dialogue. The larger the city, the faster the pace of verbal exchange – again on average. And in the remote countryside the reverse applied. Needless to say, precise evidence on this is not available. But at least one example was recorded by the celebrated early nineteenth-century wit, the Reverend Sydney Smith, whose career took him to a country rectory in North Yorkshire. One rural parishioner listened, frowning and in complete silence, to his host's jests at dinner but, after a long pause, observed: 'I see *now* what you meant, Mr. Smith; you meant a joke'. The clergyman replied solemnly: 'Yes, sir, I believe I did'. Whereupon the rustic laughed

⁵ C. Hutton (ed.), *The Life of William Hutton* (1817), p. 111.

so heartily that he almost choked.⁶ Little wonder that Smith observed wryly that ‘a joke goes a great way in the country. I have known one last pretty well for seven years’.

That mental sluggishness is what Marx and Engels meant by ‘the idiocy of rural life’.⁷ Even for these two fierce critics of the very real urban problems of nineteenth-century Britain, the solutions were to be found within the towns. Here Marx and Engels tapped into a long tradition that looked with scepticism or even outright hostility upon country life. For example, ballads poked fun at rural banality and boredom. The only conversation was the sound of the birds:

The ravens they croak, the magpies they chatter,
Quack! quack! say the ducks, as they swim on the water ...

Such was the glum refrain to a traditional song, entitled satirically ‘The Pleasures of a Country Life’.⁸

By contrast, towns were full of people – sometimes too full – with all the stimulus that implied. The urban environment was not just a focus of urban ‘problems’ and poverty. Towns were also meeting places for people and ideas. That

⁶ A. Bell, *Sydney Smith: A Biography* (Oxford, 1982), p. 96.

⁷ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in D. McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1977), p. 225.

⁸ J. Holloway and J. Black (eds), *Later English Broadside Ballads* (1975), Vol. 1, p. 212.

made them potential arenas of opportunity. In other words, towns had a strong cultural as well as economic impact.

Sights, sounds, touch, and smells – the startled senses immediately inducted newcomers into the vivacity of city street life.⁹ In the eighteenth century, the sensation of hard pavements underfoot at once signalled the relentless spread of urban improvements. Visitors from remote country areas often experienced ‘town shock’ – dazzled by the pace of a fast-moving urban way-of-life. In fact, city populations had their own divisions and tensions. Yet there were at the same time some common experiences that helped to create a sense of shared urbanism. It should be stressed again – just to avoid misunderstanding – that a popular identity for the town did not preclude many internal divisions and problems, just as a sense of national identity does not mean that there are no local, regional, class, ethnic, gender, religious or other internal divisions. But the urban image was happy to incorporate diversity.

⁹ See P.J. Corfield, ‘Walking the City Streets: The Urban Odyssey in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Journal of Urban History*, 16 (1990), pp. 132-74; and for a continental comparison, G.M. König, *Eine Kulturgeschichte des Spazierganges: Spuren einer bürgerlichen Praktik, 1780-1850* (Vienna, 1996).

I Town songs

Pervasive sounds strengthened the town identification. Instead of the animal world of the countryside, the urban environment was increasingly in thrall to humans. Street improvements in eighteenth-century Britain gradually covered the old earthen sidewalks with paving-stones or bricks. Foraging animals (pigs, geese) gradually disappeared from town, while instead only the tamed workhorses and domestic pets flourished. That gave heightened prominence to human noise: the throb of traffic, the clatter of footsteps, the ringing of church bells, the buzz of conversation, the shouts of children, and the calls of the street vendors. The incantations of the latter were often on the margins between speech and song (outdoor antecedents of the operatic patter song).



Detail from Hogarth's *Enraged Musician* (1741)

Some towns added their own musical contribution to the clamour, by employing special Town Waits [musicians]. In the resorts, important visitors were greeted upon arrival with a concert of wind instruments outside their lodgings. It was a charming thought. Alas, however, such was the enthusiasm of the Bath City Waits that the custom was discontinued in 1774, as it had apparently provoked ‘the great disturbance of the sick and others who resort to this place’.¹⁰

Among this barrage, songs – whether sung in the streets or indoors – added to the urban hubbub. This material constitutes a rich repertoire that merits further attention from historians.¹¹ From the sixteenth century onwards, the old country ballad tradition was gradually updated into a vibrant urban genre. Individual songs were adapted and rearranged,¹² as old themes were reworked and new topics incorporated. As one contemporary commented in 1747, the era constituted a ‘musical age’.¹³ It thus employed great numbers of ‘Singers and Scrapers who make

¹⁰ T. Fawcett, *Voices of Eighteenth-Century Bath: An Anthology* (Bath, 1995), p. 94.

¹¹ The essential authority is R. Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford, 1988). See also M. Karpeles, *An Introduction to English Folk Song* (Oxford, revised 1987). And two fine case studies are: R. Colls, *The Collier’s Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (1977); and G. Dunn, *The Fellowship of Song: Popular Singing Traditions in East Suffolk* (1986).

¹² For the complex adaptations of one popular courtship ballad, see R.S. Thomson, ‘The Frightful Foggy Dew’, *Folk Music Journal*, 4 (1980), pp. 35-61.

¹³ R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman ...* (1747).

a hazardous living by music’.

It was not difficult to understand why songs remained popular. They are an immediate and pleasant medium of communication with wide appeal across the social classes. Popular music is accessible, versatile, easy to understand. Men and women of all ages can both listen and participate. After all, these eighteenth-century songs were not difficult to learn, either in whole or in snatches. And music is an excellent medium for communicating emotion and ideas. The experience of sharing a common tune, voicing well known words, offered one means of bonding together diverse individuals (as in today in the case of sharing football songs or singing on protest marches). The general repertoire of popular music was not restricted to separate social classes, although there were different styles of entertainment between jolly choruses in the alehouse and operatic arias in the music room.

Contrary to the views of historians like Peter Burke,¹⁴ there was not in this period an unbridgeable gulf between ‘high’ and ‘low’ artistic cultures. Instead, there were considerable borrowings and cross-overs between them. Literary works were translated into popular song,¹⁵ while favourite tunes were adapted for more serious

¹⁴ P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978).

¹⁵ Palmer, *Sound of History*, p. 22.

purposes. At entertainment venues, like London's Vauxhall Gardens, music by Handel, which would later be defined as 'classical', was played alongside the latest hits of the day, some written by Thomas Arne who was a favourite conductor at the Gardens. Light opera especially blurred the line between 'high' and allegedly 'low' art. For example, John Gay's highly successful *Beggars Opera* (1728) re-used the evocative tune and some lyrics from 'Over the Hills and Far Away', which also continued in general circulation as a familiar song.

Above all, popular music offered a versatile form of communication that bridged the gap between the literate and illiterate town-dwellers.¹⁶ Melodies were universal, lyrics were simple and direct, but capable of subtlety and innuendo. The circulation and survival of these songs did not depend purely upon their being written down, although many were. An active oral tradition – in town as well as in the countryside – preserved and freely adapted this material.¹⁷ One consequence is that songs are notoriously difficult to pin down to a specific time and place, even after 1797 when broadside ballad sheets were theoretically required to show the date of publication.

¹⁶ Illiteracy rates were falling in the very long term; but that still left many illiterates living in British towns: see L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900', *Past & Present*, 42 (1969), pp. 69-139.

¹⁷ On the oral tradition, see Palmer, *Sound of History*, pp. 1-13.

Many themes were hymned by the urban balladeers. That is amply demonstrated in the enormous, if random, corpus of material that has survived. Traditional country songs were imported into the town, either in their original format or updated. And new ballads were created to be sung in the streets and circulated in broadside (single sheet) editions. It was a genre which expanded dramatically in response to popular demand, being facilitated by the popularisation of printing in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The first English folksong collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to be highly disparaging about broadside ballads, which they viewed as a corrupted form. Folk music was for them essentially music of the countryside.¹⁹ But, for the cultural historian, the shift from rural to urban marked instead the versatility and enduring power of song. Country music was updated effortlessly into an urban format.

Thus there were songs for townspeople who worked together.²⁰ There were jolly choruses for those who drank together. Many song-books had titles which stressed conviviality, from *The Merry Companion: Or, Universal Songster* (1742) to

¹⁸ See C.M. Simpson, *The British Broadside Ballad and its Music* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1966); E.K. Wells, *The Ballad Tree: A Study of British and American Ballads* (1951); and L. Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (1962).

¹⁹ C.J. Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (1907), pp.101-103.

²⁰ See generally G. Porter, *The English Occupational Song* (Stockholm, 1992).

the *Jolly Fellows' Convivial Songster* (1820), via *The Jovial Songster: Or, Laugh and Be Fat* (1790). Then there were political jingles and election songs. There were rhymes to commemorate the news and events of the day. There were songs of courtship. And there were universal songs of love and of disappointment in love.

Moreover, there was a fine tradition of bawdy ballads, which were often both frank and humorous. Francis Place recalled that artisans in late eighteenth-century London alehouses listened appreciatively to such material and applauded vigorously 'by clapping their hands and rapping the tables'.²¹ Not only were there many bawdy songs with explicit messages, as in *The Frisky Songster* (1770), but there were also those that traded in rhythmic sexual innuendo ('in and out', 'to and fro' and 'the bobbin jo').²²

In addition, there were songs about specific urban experiences and specific places. Local ballad collections were sold in sets of four or five on one sheet. These were known as 'Garlands', as in (for example) 'The Bristol Garland'. Many contained simple verses that celebrated the town identity and the sense of belonging. Clearly, the compilers of these collections were responding to an identifiable

²¹ V. Gammon, 'Song, Sex and Society in England, 1600-1850', *Folk Music Journal*, 4 (1982), p. 231.

²² Simpson, *British Broadside Ballad*, pp. 46-7. See also G. Speaight, *Bawdy Songs of the Early Music Hall* (Newton Abbot, 1975).

consumer demand. So the residents of eighteenth-century Shrewsbury were able to hear or sing a warm-hearted local ballad:²³

A song in praise of that famous town,
Which hath throughout all England gained renown –
In praise thereof let everyone agree
And say with one accord: *Shrewsbury for me!*

In practice, no evidence records how often this particular song was chorused. And historians cannot assume that everyone who did sing it was passionately fond of the place. But Shrewsbury was certainly identifiable as a distinctive urban environment, separate from the surrounding countryside. Although its population was never very large (c.7,500 residents in 1700), it was a long-established regional capital in the north-west Midlands. That made it a highly plausible candidate for a local song-of-praise.

Furthermore, research is discovering that many other towns were similarly celebrated. Urban celebrations in song were not focused solely upon ancient centres, such as Winchester or York. In the eighteenth century, new ballads came into circulation in praise of fast-growing industrial centres. There was a song to explain that steel-manufacturing ‘Sheffield’s a wonderful town, O!’ Another sang of ‘The pleasures of Sunderland Town, O!’, indicating local support for this fast-growing

²³ Ballad in Pepysian Library, Cambridge, as quoted in T. Auden, *Shrewsbury: A Topographical and Historical Account of the Town* (1905), p. 215.

industrial port at the mouth of the River Wear.

In both these instances, the concluding ‘O!’ suggested a jolly song for group singing, probably accompanied by drink. In both cases, it was clear that it was not only the most historic or romantic cities that gained musical commemoration, or even the largest and most important places. Thus the small township of Bungay on the Norfolk/Suffolk border was toasted genially in the 1810s with its own song, whose refrain declared confidently that: ‘Old Bungay’s a wonderful Town!’

To extend the comparison: in musical Ireland, too, there were many similar urban songs of praise to small places as well as the large cities. Thus ‘Of all the towns in Ireland, Kilkenny for me’ was rivalled by Ulster’s *TaRa Limavady*: ‘Search Ireland around/There cannot be found/Another town like Limavady’; or a mid-nineteenth-century paean to Mullingar (Westmeath) ‘Ye may strain your muscles/To brag of Brussels/Of London, Paris or Timbuctoo/... But they’re all inferior/To the vast superior/ And gorgeous City of Mullingar’. Humour, yes; but affection undoubtedly too.

Many places were commemorated in this sort of way. Either towns had their own songs, or sometimes a catchy ballad was unofficially adopted as a local anthem, even though the lyrics might not relate directly to the town in question.²⁴

²⁴ Similar town songs were found all over Europe. For example, Budapest in the 1930s was

Again, there are only fragmentary records that indicate how often and in what circumstances this music was actually performed. Yet the survival of a huge number of songs – characteristically in single broadside format, spelling out the words with advice on the relevant tune – indicated that copies of the lyrics were produced for commercial circulation.²⁵ In addition, people learned songs from hearing other people. One common device was to set new or updated words to a traditional and popular tune. That aided audience reception, as familiar music was easy to hear and learn.

Some information is available about the production of town songs as a genre. In the later eighteenth century, two famous urban ballad composer-performers were John Freeth of Birmingham (1731-1808) and Joseph Mather of Sheffield (1737-1804). They both sang on a great variety of issues, from the national to the intensely local. Both supported political reform, at a time when it was daring to do so. On more than one occasion, Joseph Mather fell foul of the Sheffield authorities and spent time in the town gaol, for voicing popular grievances and for lampooning local bigwigs. John Freeth, meanwhile, became known in Birmingham as the ‘Bard of Freedom’ for

associated with a popular song about a young servant girl who walks by the river, hoping to marry a soldier - a characteristic urban scene.

²⁵ For the ballad trade, see Palmer, *Sound of History*, pp. 13-29.

his political commentaries. In the inflationary 1790s, for example, he sang pointedly in complaint at high food prices: ‘Nothing is cheap in Old England but soup’.²⁶

Both these cases provide examples of successful ballad-mongers who were able to draw upon and reflect strong local feelings. Town songs were associated not only with communal identity generally but also with specific moments of collective emotion. An example is found among the output of Joseph Mather. In 1795, he penned an angry ballad about a notorious incident in Sheffield, when the soldiery behaved brutally whilst dispersing an alleged riot.²⁷

I saw the tragic scene commence;
A madman drunk, without offence
Drew out his sword in false pretence
And wounded some more wise;
Defenceless boys he chased about,
The timid cried, the bold did shout,
Which brought the curious no doubt
To see what meant the noise ...

The song gained great immediacy from its style of partisan reportage, which explained how the incident had snowballed. Interestingly, too, the lyrics referred to the process whereby the crowds quickly assembled to see what was happening.

²⁶ J. Freeth, *A Touch on the Times: Being a Collection of New Songs to Old Tunes* (Birmingham, 1808), p. 14. For context, see also J. Horden, *John Freeth, 1731-1808: Political Ballad-Writer and Innkeeper* (Oxford, 1993).

²⁷ J. Wilson (ed.), *The Songs of Joseph Mather* (Sheffield, 1862), p. 39.

Songs had a ready currency among the mobile urban populations of eighteenth-century Britain. Crowds gathered to hear old favourites and newly-minted versions. ‘Good people give attention and listen to my rhymes/ ... ’ was a common opening.²⁸ At the same time, songs could be sung singly or in groups. In the eighteenth-century towns, there were many music clubs, for direct participation. The extent to which women took an independent role in these activities is uncertain. Most of the best-known street singers were men, although there were some female street vendors who sang or chanted their cries. On the subject of gender, it is notable that songs took the lives of both men and women as their subject matter. These were after all themes of universal interest. Moreover, there was certainly no restriction upon men singing songs about women or *vice versa*.

As that gender eclecticism implied, historians should not interpret the lyrics too literally or too solemnly. Popular ballads were far from being legal documents, issued upon oath. Historians cannot, therefore, assume that all material produced by or for the urban working class was a direct statement of a single popular ‘mentality’.²⁹ Songs could be sung humorously or ironically, with tongue in cheek.

²⁸ Example from J. Holloway and J. Black (eds), *Later English Broadside Ballads* (1979), Vol. 2, p. 281.

²⁹ See comment in J. Barry, ‘Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective’, in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*

For example, ‘Manchester’s Improving Daily’ (c.1826) could be sung either sincerely or sarcastically. Droll presentations appealed to the knowingness of the crowd, who were quick to catch the jokes. Thus favourite songs were often burlesqued or parodied, while song-sheets were sometimes illustrated with a comical sketch. At the same time, ballads could be simply sung to enjoy the tune, without paying much attention to the words at all.

Entertainment was the prime aim of popular music. However, how people enjoy themselves is in itself a significant historical variable. Popular music in the towns offered a means of forging and reaffirming a collective recognition, even when the music was played in snatches – rather like advertising jingles today.

Of course, there was not universal approval of every item. Recognition was a basic minimum, while listeners could find many diverse meanings within this material. The point was, however, that a variegated and self-renewing cultural tradition was transmitted from town generation to town generation, and from old-established residents to newcomers. That fostered an evolutionary link between the traditional street ballads of urbanising Britain and the lively world of the music hall in the later nineteenth century,³⁰ and thence into the light musical entertainments of

(Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 73-4.

³⁰ P. Bailey, ‘Custom, Capital and Culture in the Victorian Music Hall’, in R.D. Storch (ed.),

today – both in the vernacular and commercial traditions.³¹

II Town swells and country bumpkins

Characteristically, the format of these songs was simple and direct. They were deliberately repetitious, to aid recollection. Indeed, they were often rather formulaic and even sometimes banal. But that, too, was part of the point. Popular songs were drawn from everyday life, and wove their spell by celebrating the routine and the quotidian. Copies of broadsides were pinned up on workshop walls, as well as hawked and sung through the streets. This material was part of daily life.

A frequent theme within town ballads was the celebration or identification of the urban environment itself. Often that was done jokingly. Two songs about the fast-growing metropolis in the 1820s encouraged listeners to laugh.³² ‘O London’s a comical place ...’ began one, pointing in proof to the city’s misleading street names. There were no cattle in Cow Cross, no bees in Honey Lane, no hill at Mount Street, no trees in Orchard Street, no Greeks in Greek Street, and so forth. A matching song

Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England (1982), pp. 180-208; P. Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes, 1986); and U. Schneider, *Die Londoner Music Hall und ihre Songs, 1850-1920* (Tübingen, 1984).

³¹ For the sociology of modern song-making, see M. Pickering and T. Green (eds), *Popular Song and the Vernacular Milieu* (Milton Keynes, 1987).

³² Holloway and Black, *Later English Broadside Ballads*, Vol. 2, pp. 295-9.

also encouraged people to reflect humorously upon the complex metropolis:

What an overgrown place is this London, oh dear
Though half of it yet I have not seen, or near ...
In every man who can walk up and down
There's a fund of amusement in great London Town.

Lyrics such as these offered reassurance that others shared the confusion of confronting rapid urban growth. Laughter helped to draw the sting. Thus, ultimately, both ballads provided an unofficial education in town ways, advising listeners to enjoy the shock of the new without taking things too literally or seriously.

Topics that inspired the songsters were many and various. Descriptions of locations were not uncommon. But much the most frequent references were to the people who lived and came to town. It was quite rare to find songs purely about institutions.³³ The focus was human – and usually individual. The city crowds were characteristically invoked not *en masse* but as identifiable people.

Furthermore, town loyalties were invoked not only by positive affirmation ('Sheffield's wonderful Town O!') but also by contrast with the non-town. The prime target was usually rural. Although there were often prolonged and historic rivalries between neighbouring towns, the songs did not usually denounce an urban

³³ Accordingly, it may be predicted that any successful songs about the European Union will be written about its people rather than about the European Parliament or the European Council of Ministers O!

competitor. Instead, the smart ways of town residents were contrasted generically with the boring life of the countryside and, especially, with the dim-witted mentality of the country bumpkin. He (it was usually a he) made an ideal ‘other’, against whom a favourable urban identity could be defined. (By contrast, songs about country maidens often had a sexual rather than anti-urban innuendo).

In ballads, the male bumpkin became a social misfit as soon as he arrived in town. He was teased as a country ‘clown’ or, even more graphically, as a ‘clod-hopper’, whose boots were still heavy with country mud. While the town swells laughed knowingly at the mistakes of the simple rustic visitor to town, they reaffirmed their own up-to-date modishness and style. The joke was particularly piquant since many urban residents were either themselves recent migrants from the countryside or the offspring of earlier generations of migrants.

Incidentally, it may be noted that there was an alternative ballad and poetic tradition that sang happily of the beauties of the countryside. This kindly pastoral trope had very long history. Moreover, it was reanimated in the later decades of the eighteenth century and after by Wordsworth's measured praise of rural solitude and his repeated invocation of archetypal country folk (‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, ‘The Solitary Reaper’, ‘The Shepherd’, ‘The Gleaner’, ‘The Westmorland Girl’). However, it is worth noting that the literary celebrants of the physical countryside did

not often extend the same enthusiasm to the tough and repetitive work of the farm labourers. It was the same in popular song. There were country work ditties that featured hoeing and ploughing.³⁴ But the urban populations did not sing songs that expressed a desire to join in these back-breaking tasks. Instead, while the town swells admired the physical countryside, they often disparaged its inhabitants.

‘Farmer Stump’s Journey to London’ was an early nineteenth-century ballad that was a very characteristic example of urban joking at the expense of the country bumpkin.³⁵ The rustic hero, accompanied by his horse Dobbin, sang:

I am a poor country lad and humble is my lot,
I have been up to London just to see what is what;
I know how to thresh, tho’ I don’t know all my letters,
But I soon shall improve here among all my betters ...

Farmer Stump poked fun at the absurd town fashions. But the chief laughter was derived from the countryman’s comical wonderment at up-to-date urban ways.

On the whole, the humour in these songs was kindly. The rustic ‘other’ was teased, not hated. Indeed, by explaining some of the pitfalls of town life, the ballads were wryly educational. Thus another very typical town song, using the popular title ‘The World Turn’d Upside Down’, warned about the well-known risk of

³⁴ Palmer, *Sound of History*, pp. 31-7.

³⁵ Holloway and Black, *Later English Broadside Ballads*, Vol. 2, p. 278.

encountering a pick-pocket while mingling with urban crowds:

Now while I stood gaping about,
Where there was a row and a racket,
I felt summat warm in my fob,
'Twas a man's hand in my pocket.

Says I, sire, you've made a mistake,
Then my gentleman sneaked away
And with all the money I had,
Yes – and *besides my time of day*.

... What have you seen? cried mother,
Boy, and what have you got to say?
Why Lunnon [London], mother, is the devil,
And, mother, *that's the time of day*.³⁶

Here the town song was not simply euphoric about town life. While satirising the gormless country lad, the lyrics were also frank about the potential urban dangers. It was a ballad of observation and of warning. Its catch-phrase '*That's the time of day*' was an idiomatic phrase from the 1820s, meaning 'That's the way things are'. The song thus reminded listeners of the all-too-common hazards in every great metropolis.

Indeed, the throngs of people around musicians constituted especially prime targets for pickpockets, who lifted valuable personal goods such as silk handkerchiefs, purses and watches. One early nineteenth-century ballad about

³⁶ Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 283 [slightly modernised].

London's Bartholomew Fair explained frankly that pleasures came with risks:³⁷

There's crowding by days and by nights,
And Music on every side pleasing ye;
Here's a mob's round the Fiddles and Fights,
And pickpockets of your cash easing ye ...

Other songs similarly warned of the risk of being bamboozled by cheats, of being robbed or infected by prostitutes, of being waylaid by bawds or accosted by pimps, or of being attacked by malefactors. The list of potential hazards was impressive. Singing a song could not, of course, console people for encountering such disasters. Yet the ballads did offer good advice to all urban walkers – to keep their eyes open and their wits about them – in a folk music of familiarisation.

III Street Life

Street scenes recurred throughout these songs, as the streets were prime locations for a wide range of social encounters. The art of town-walking was considered as a good means of getting a town education. Indeed, one author in 1698 declared enthusiastically that the citizens themselves constituted 'the best *Living Library* to instruct mankind, that ever you met with'.³⁸ Learning to read this complicated source

³⁷ Palmer, *Sound of History*, p. 161.

³⁸ Ned Ward (1698), quoted in Corfield, 'Walking the City Streets', p. 141.

was the best way to survive in the urban environment. Hence a number of songs celebrated social pedestrianism – the fun of stepping out ‘to see and be seen’, as the famous phrase declared. Little wonder that many songs began ‘As I was walking forth ...’.

Pedestrians had to learn to watch where they trod, and how to cope with the various challenges posed by the crowds, the new-style hard paving stones (‘oh my poor feet’), and the oncoming traffic. Increasingly, in the eighteenth century, both the etiquette and regulation of the streets became formalised. Walkers learned not to push and jostle each other; as well as (normally) not to spit or piss in public. The law was, of course, hostile to brawls and affrays. And opinion increasingly turned against duelling and visible violence in public places. Custom and practice became civilised and urbanised, although the rules were not always perfectly obeyed.³⁹

More mundanely, too, municipal authorities undertook to keep the thoroughfares reasonably clean and unobstructed. Of course, that was undertaken with differing success in different places. Dank alleys often lurked behind smart main roads. Rubbish and unsavoury smells were never entirely banished, despite the efforts of the official town scavengers to clear streets and ditches. Unofficial

³⁹ R. Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger?* (Leicester, 1990), examines newspaper ‘panics’ and concludes that the cries of alarm were generally exaggerated.

‘bunters’ [foragers] meanwhile hunted through back-street dung-hills at night collecting old rags and bones. But the emergent notoriety of a few dirty town centres in the later eighteenth century suggests that elsewhere a higher standard was encountered. Edinburgh Old Town had the least pleasant streets for the unwary walker, with heaps of uncleared human and animal refuse. Thus on a visit in 1798, Sydney Smith explained that ‘I am in a constant balance between admiration and trepidation’. Indeed, he penned a short verse to explain the cause of his agitation:⁴⁰

Taste guides my eye, where'er new beauties spread,
While prudence whispers: "*Look before you tread*".

Meanwhile, the areas where pedestrians walked were becoming demarcated, on the main thoroughfares, by bollards and chains or by raised pavements. That began the gradual segregation of people from traffic, which became ever more necessary as the volume and speed of transport grew. The urban horse and cab (coming into large-scale use from the later eighteenth century onwards) offered the advantage of speedy cross-town movement, but also increased the need for street cleansing.⁴¹ Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were regular ‘crossing-sweepers’ at busy junctions, so that pedestrians could avoid getting their shoes soiled

⁴⁰ Quoted in Bell, *Sydney Smith*, p. 15.

⁴¹ By the later nineteenth century, there were as many as a million and a half town horses in Britain, each producing 3-4 tons of droppings a year: F.M.L. Thompson, ‘Nineteenth-Century Horse Sense’, *Economic History Review*, 2 ser. 29 (1979), p. 77.

with horse dung.

As the presence of sundry traders and labourers indicated, the town street was a poly-functional environment. It constituted a place of work as well as a thoroughfare for population movement and/or a place for social entertainment. The ballad-singers were thus joined by multitudes of street-vendors, crossing-sweepers, lamp-lighters, bellmen, city waits, scavengers, porters, chairmen, and carriers, who all laboured amongst the traffic. And there were also many professional street-walkers in the ports and great cities, who offered and sometimes performed their services in the street. Their calls to passersby in search of trade were part of the urban litany.

Numbers of these outdoor occupations were directly commemorated in song. For example, in eighteenth-century London, Bath and the premier resorts, there were hundreds of sturdy sedan-chairmen who carried individual passengers across town. It was heavy work. One heartfelt ballad paid mournful tribute to the labours of 'The Jolly Chairmen' (c. 1750): 'Like slaves through the street we run trudging together/ With this huffing Spark [Gallant] in our Chairs made of Leather'. But the song also advertised the discretion of the men who took fares all over London, to smart venues or to disreputable dens.

Moreover, the ballad took the opportunity to disparage the opposition. A coach

gave but a bumpy ride, while the chairmen took care to carry their passengers gently: 'A Chair then is call'd for to ride through the Town,/ The which are as easy as beds of soft down'.⁴² In this case, the ballad carried multiple meanings, as it simultaneously joked about the trade and advertised its services. Eventually, however, the advantages of speed prevailed: the coach-and-horse took over and by the early nineteenth century the sedan-chairmen had disappeared.

One function of the street that has retained its long history was its use for social and recreational purposes. From alleyway to boulevard, these routes represented gathering-places, potentially accessible to all. As a result, people frequently gathered in the streets, whether for processions and festivities or for demonstrations and marches. Holidays and local festivals were celebrated with great determination, as a welcome antidote to the drudgery of daily life. Many songs hailed the delights of the annual town fairs. By the eighteenth century, the commercial importance of these events was in steep decline. Yet their social role roles survived. They were places to meet people.

Above all, popular songs associated a visit to a fair with sexual suggestiveness. It was always possible to find a new partner among the crowds. One ballad about

⁴² R. Palmer, *A Ballad History of England: From 1588 to the Present Day* (1979), p. 58.

Greenwich Fair listed all the entertainments available there, concluding sagely:⁴³

Some this frolic will repent,
Their cloaths all pawn'd and money spent;
Some in nine months I do declare,
Will see the fruits of Greenwich Fair.

Communal social gatherings were not, however, confined to the annual festivities and holidays. There were numerous other occasions and venues for people to meet. Many towns had traditional walking places by river banks or on town walls. Other urban centres, including especially the eighteenth-century spas and resorts, developed newly built tree-lined promenades and parades.⁴⁴ These ventures were a clear signal of the popularity of social walking. People gathered daily to stroll up and down for the fun of taking the air, greeting friends, meeting strangers, watching other people, hearing the local news, and gossiping about the latest fashions and follies of the day. Nor were such scenes confined exclusively to the resorts. Everywhere, Sunday afternoons were particularly popular times for the social promenade – weather and season permitting.

There was a certain amount of specialisation between promenades in areas of

⁴³ Holloway and Black, *Later English Broadside Ballads*, Vol. 2, p. 106.

⁴⁴ P. Borsay, 'The Rise of the Promenade: The Social and Cultural Use of Space in the Provincial Town, c.1660-1800', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 9 (1986), pp. 125-40.

wealth and of poverty. Yet it is wrong to assume that only the urban elite enjoyed social walking. The pastime was everywhere popular, partly because it was so adaptive and inexpensive as a form of entertainment. For example, one popular nineteenth-century song originated in a very proletarian part of the capital city: that was ‘Doing the Lambeth Walk’, which was also the accompaniment to a popular and still-(just about)-surviving community dance. Another well-known metropolitan song agreed: ‘Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner, that I love London Town’. And its verses similarly invoked the pleasures of social ambulation, as the singers claimed to ‘get a funny feeling inside of me,/ Just walking up and down ...’.

Holiday resorts in particular became prime places for both social congregation and musical entertainment. At the seaside, there was usually a sea-front walk and, in the nineteenth century, a recreational pier. The earliest of these structures, at Ryde on the Isle of Wight, was built in 1813-14 to allow passengers to disembark in safety. But seaside piers were quickly favoured as venues for social walking and entertainment, whilst breathing fresh sea air above the waves.⁴⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, every coastal resort of any standing had its own pleasure pier or coastal promenade. Thus when people sang the well-known song from the later nineteenth-century: ‘Oh I do like to be beside the seaside,/ I do like to be beside the

⁴⁵ S.H. Adamson, *Seaside Piers* (1977), pp. 12-23.

sea ...’, they were not referring to a solitary walk along the seashore. The following verses made that clear. The song praised the sound of the ‘big brass band’ which went ‘tiddly-om-pom-pom’; and lauded the fun of walking with the crowds along the ‘prom-prom-prom’ [promenade]. This was a very urban vision of seaside sociability, recorded in a very urban song. The natural environment was framed with urban accoutrements and sung about amusingly as such.

IV Pro-urbanism

In summary, three main points may be highlighted. The first stresses the vitality of urban music-making. That included the pervasive production and circulation of popular songs, which provided an ubiquitous accompaniment to daily life – rather like the background noise of radio music from the twentieth century onwards.

Commercial interests undoubtedly played a significant role in this process. But, with such a product, the market had to pay close attention to popular taste. Moreover, composition and performance was never exclusively a matter for professional musicians. Many participated spontaneously. Song-writing itself was not a very lucrative way of life, as Joseph Mather in Sheffield discovered. He remained a part-timer, working among his fellow cutlers, as well as writing and singing ballads. Others songs were written by complete amateurs, who were spontaneously inspired

by specific events. That was one of the enduring strengths of popular music. Laypeople were intensively familiar with the genre; and they could easily fit new lyrics to old tunes.

Gradually, in the nineteenth century, their home-produced music was squeezed by the wholesale commercialisation of entertainment. Songs were standardised into something like a formalised canon, although there were always multiple variants in performance. By 1851, there were at least 700 publishers in England and Wales who printed street ballads for sale.⁴⁶ And the number of professional entertainers and musicians was also growing. But the old ways never disappeared. Musical performance was a popular amateur recreation throughout the Victorian era and afterwards, as seen in the continuing growth of glee clubs [singing part-songs], choirs, music societies, orchestras, and brass bands.⁴⁷

Musical composition, as opposed to performance, probably became less widespread as the impact of commercialisation spread. However, some continued spontaneously to write new lyrics to comment on significant events and emotions.

⁴⁶ J.M. Golby and A.W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England, 1750-1900* (1984), p. 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-7. An example of the richness of urban music-making was provided in the exhibition 'Sounds like Manchester' at the John Rylands Library, Manchester (Sept. 1997-Jan. 1998).

Thus in 1954 the social historian G.M. Trevelyan remembered:⁴⁸

As late as fifty years ago, humble folk occasionally wrote ballads on events of the day according to the old tradition. I have seen a genuine ballad about a fire [1890], the last verse of which begins ‘O London County Council’.

Moreover, especially since the folksong revival in the 1960s, the live music-making and performing tradition continues to flourish across Britain’s cities today.⁴⁹

A second notable theme is that popular music from the later seventeenth century onwards offered a running commentary on the experience of urbanisation. It contributed to a process of recognition and acculturation. Material relating to town life was rarely written as overt propaganda. Instead, songs carried many meanings and were sung in different ways: from a reverent rendering to a drunken carousal. That was a large part of their attraction. Even a short, simple verse could contain a multitude of subtleties. In the later eighteenth century, that linguistic potential was realised in the poems of Robert Burns. Many of those, when set to music, became ballad standards – known the world over. Similarly, William Blake’s poetic ‘Songs of Innocence’ (1789) and ‘Songs of Experience’ (1794) transmuted the simple ballad format into the imaginative realms of original artistry.

⁴⁸ G.M. Trevelyan, ‘The Border Ballads’, in his *A Layman's Love of Letters* (1954), as quoted in Palmer, *Sound of History*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ See E. McVicar, *One Singer, One Song: Songs of Glasgow Folk* (Glasgow City Libraries, 1990) for a lively first-hand account of the folksong revival.

Songs were therefore immensely variegated. But the key point was that they were available. Thus town populations had easy access to words and tunes that were associated with town life, that were sung in the towns, and that often dealt with themes about the town. It made for a living musical and cultural tradition.



Another detail from Hogarth's *Enraged Musician* (1741)

Thirdly and finally, it may be noted that, within the ever-widening repertoire of songs, there was a corpus of complimentary material about the towns. These local songs-of-praise were interestingly widespread. Their production was not organised officially but developed both spontaneously and commercially. Song lyrics were generally jaunty and confident. Rarely were there serious urban lamentations.

Common rhymes were 'town' and 'renown'. The tone was usually affectionate, even if voiced with a mocking humour. Townspeople were depicted as sharp and quick-witted, in contrast to the torpidity and sluggishness of the rustic 'other'.

Town songs, whether of cheery praise or of ironic identification, thus indicated clearly that local attachments were (and are) just as possible in the teeming great cities as in the tiniest villages.

The belief that all urban populations were comprised of isolated, benumbed, unhappy victims is a myth. Instead, townspeople had multiple means of active involvement and personal agency. They constantly tapped into a vocalised urban soundtrack, with news, views, emotions and arguments. So one daily feature of routine town life was to listen to songs, or to hum along, and/or to sing.