

Political satire:
Nineteenth-century comic histories of Liverpool

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The Pope, however, refused [to grant Henry VIII a divorce] and seceded with all his followers from the Church of England. This was called the Restoration.¹

When Sellar and Yeatman produced their romp through English history, *1066 and all that*, they were following a well-trodden path. Behind their comic history there was an extensive hinterland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when comic histories were a stock in trade of journalists and political satirists.² As Gilbert A. Beckett wrote in the preface to his *Comic history of England*, the aim of such works, which often originally appeared in serial forms in journals³ and magazines, was to 'blend amusement with instruction' and to serve up 'in as palatable shape as possible' 'the facts of English history'. The tone and style of such works is illustrated by Beckett's comments on the battle of Hastings: 'Harold, whose spirit never deserted him, observed with reference

¹ W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman, *1066 and all that* (London, 1930), p. 54.

² Gilbert A. Beckett, *The comic history of England* (London, 1848). Beckett's *Comic history* first appeared in *Punch* in 1846 and revised editions continued to be published throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (down to 1907). Alfred Crowquil (A.H. Forrester), *The comic history of the kings and queens of England* (London, 1860), R.H. Edgar, *Ye comic history of heraldry* (London 1878), A Moreland, *The comic history of sport* (London, 1924), W. Parke, edited by E.J. Brett, *The comic history of London* (London, 1875), J.D. Sherwood, *The comic history of the United States* (Boston, Mass., 1870), P.Q. Philander Smiff (A.A. Dowty), *A comic history of France* (London, 1888), C.M. Synder, *A comic history of Greece* (Philadelphia, 1898).

³ *1066 and all that* followed in this tradition, first appearing in *Punch*.

to the wound in his eye, that it was a sad lookout, but he must make the best of it'.⁴

This presentation of history 'in a homely shape' is very much the style associated with comic histories, largely as a result of the influence of practitioners such as Sellar and Yeatman.⁵ But the genre in the nineteenth century also had a sharper edge to it when it was used to comment critically and satirically on contemporary politics. Local politics, particularly, provided ample and easily identifiable targets and an eager readership for the local satirist or political pundit. Liverpool and its politics, along with other great Victorian cities, did not escape the barbs of sharp pens and quick wits.

William Shepherd's *The true and wonderful history of Dick Liver* first appeared in 1824 and was reissued in 1832 at the time of the national political debate preceding the Great Reform Bill and the later Municipal Reform Act and was clearly intended to influence local opinion at this time of heightened political awareness.⁶ Shepherd was the long serving – for over fifty years – minister of the Unitarian chapel at Gateacre, in the southern suburbs of Liverpool. Born in Liverpool in 1768, Shepherd was educated in dissenting academies in Lancashire, the Midlands and London, before becoming minister at Gateacre in 1791. Having inherited burgess status in Liverpool from his master cordwainer father, William, in 1796, Shepherd took an active part in Liverpool politics as an 'advanced liberal' and 'enthusiast for civil and religious liberty'. One biographer suggests that Shepherd had a 'rollicking sense of humour, which was readily turned on people and political positions he detested'.⁷ Shepherd's *Dick Liver* was essentially a free-ranging political satire on Liverpool's recent history and its contemporary politics.

⁴ Beckett, *Comic history* (new edn, London, 1850), preface and p. 54.

⁵ *1066 and all that* largely eschewed contemporary comment, although not always as in the passage where Thomas à Belloc asked who would rid him of this Chesterton beast, Sellar and Yeatman, *1066 and all that*, p. 21.

⁶ William Shepherd, *The true and wonderful history of Dick Liver* (Liverpool, 1824 and 1832).

⁷ Albert Nicholson and R.K. Webb, 'William Shepherd', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (61 vols, Oxford, 2004).

Timothy Touchstone, Shepherd's alter ego, set out to write the history of Dick Liver, a personification of Liverpool and its politics, from his humble origins as a fisherman to his later prosperity as a man of property. Shepherd's first target was the slave trade, which he saw as the source of Liverpool's current prosperity in the early nineteenth century. He was sorry to say that 'for a season Dick turned kidnapper'. He captured 'black men on the coast of Africa' and sold them 'by auction to the best bidder'. When it was pointed out to Dick that 'this was not a fair kind of dealing' Dick got very 'peevisish and cross'. Shepherd was also concerned by the effect on Liverpool's business morals of the prosperity produced by the slave trade. He observed that 'while Dick was in this business of kidnapping he grew more and more vulgar every day and from a civil and inoffensive gentleman was fast degenerating into a blackguard'.

Abolition of the slave trade was largely, if not exclusively so, bitterly resisted in Liverpool. Dick thus was 'very surly under this interdiction and irreverently cursed the whole parliament'. However, abolition, Shepherd argued, had brought benefits to Liverpool and Dick seemed 'to be now pretty well reconciled to it and it is agreed on all hands that by its enforcement his manner has been very much mended'.⁸

Among other targets in Shepherd's 30-page long satire was Liverpool's role in the cotton trade and its relations with Manchester, personified as Tim Twist, 'great weaver and spinner'. Shepherd's, perhaps surprising, lightness of touch is well illustrated in his treatment of Liverpool's dealings with its great north-western rival. A 'Yankee correspondent' had sent Dick a 'bag of cotton to dispose of'. Luckily for him, he had met Tim Twist, 'a close fisted fellow, eternally busy at his wheels or loom'. Dick quickly realises that Tim's pocket was 'better filled than his own' and although he mocked his Lancashire accent and dialect, he decided to 'assiduously cultivate his acquaintance'. Dick soon found 'the weak side' of his new friend Tim and, using that advantage, he 'dextrously contrived to make considerable profit'. Despite the exploitation of Manchester by Liverpool, both benefited from the working relationship. At various times Tim had

⁸ Shepherd, *History of Dick Liver*, p. 4.

‘wished Dick at the Devil’ but quickly found that he could not do without him and ‘though, when he sees him approaching his premises he warns his apprentice to lock up the till and have an eye to the gingham’, he continued to do more business than ever with Dick.⁹

Shepherd also offers perceptive insights into relations between Liverpool’s established community and migrants from Scotland and Ireland in these early decades of the nineteenth century. Interestingly in the light of later history of community relations in Liverpool, the native Liverpudlian, according to Shepherd, felt more threatened at this time by Scottish merchants rather than by Irish migrants. Scottish merchants, in the person of Andrew Muckleraw, he suggested, tried to muscle in on Liverpool’s commercial prosperity and Glasgow attempted to rival Liverpool as an Atlantic port. Despite Dick’s resistance to Andrew setting up a stall, Dick reluctantly had to reach ‘an accommodation’ and accept that there was ‘custom enough for both’. But still Dick complained and swore that the Scots were ‘like Norway rats – they eat up the original rats’. On the other hand, in these pre-Irish Famine decades, Shepherd argued that Liverpool’s political and commercial elite saw little threat from Irish migrants. Phelim O’Flighty, as described by Shepherd, a significant contributor to the later stereotype of the Irish, was an excellent example of the feckless Irishman beloved of music hall and later comedians.¹⁰ He was a ‘gay, sprightly, careless fellow’. Dick did not see him as ‘a dangerous rival in business’. Phelim, on the contrary, was a ‘desperate frequenter of the dram shop and the tavern’ and would travel ‘twenty miles to see a horse race or a cock fight’. He lay in bed so late each morning that the ‘shutters of everybody’s shop were open before his’. He also had an ‘evil habit of getting tipsy and gave the parish constable much trouble’. Nevertheless, he was a ‘prodigious favourite with the women’.¹¹

Shepherd’s discussion of the Irish in Liverpool was shaped by the then existing situation in Liverpool. Although by this time

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10.

¹⁰ For discussion of such Liverpool-Irish stereotypes, see John Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: The history of the Liverpool-Irish, 1800-1939* (Liverpool, 2007), *passim*.

¹¹ Shepherd, *History of Dick Liver*, pp. 10-13.

there was significant Irish migration into Liverpool, it was in many respects a controlled migration. The Irish migrants came to Liverpool to do specific jobs, to dig and build the rapidly expanding dock system, for example. The Irish migrant workers for whom St Patrick's church in Toxteth was built in the 1820 – the foundation stone being laid in 1821 and the church itself formally opened in 1827, 'leading Liberals' giving substantial assistance¹² – were numerically only a fraction of the Irish Famine victims who crowded into Liverpool 15 or so years after Shepherd's second edition appeared.

Perhaps Shepherd's major target was the un-reformed town council and its mismanagement of the town's resources, notably the growing dock estate. At first, Dick had managed his own estate but when the novelty wore off he 'grew listless and indifferent' and through indolence ceased to supervise his officers. The steward (the common council) of Dick's property (the resources of the town) was profligate with those resources. He kept a public table with 'plenty of boiled and roast – without any stint of punch and strong ale' and kept a 'grand carriage'. Dick's family arms and motto, *Deus nobis haec otia fecit* (God gave us this leisure) was translated as 'God be thanked for a snug berth'. Fortunately, Dick's eyes were eventually opened by some 'mischievous persons' (a reference to a long running dispute at the end of the eighteenth century involving one of the aldermen, Clegg, and the common council). Liverpool woke up. Dick 'must have been asleep for a number of years past'. While 'I have been dozing a gang of rogues have taken possession of my property'.¹³ Shepherd clearly wrote this final section to influence the debate in the 1820s and 1830s about the need not only for parliamentary reform but also for municipal reform.

Porcupine was a weekly political journal founded in 1860 by Hugh Shimmin, its editor and joint owner. It ran two versions of a comic history of Liverpool, the first in 1863 and 1864 and another version in 1877, a couple of years before Shimmin's death. Hugh Shimmin, journalist and editor, was born in 1819 in the Isle of Man but moved as a child via Whitehaven to Liverpool. Although

¹² Thomas Burke, *The Catholic history of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1910), p. 39.

¹³ Shepherd, *History of Dick Liver*, pp. 16-19.

in later life he seems to have 'retreated from radical liberalism' into fervent Anglicanism, he had been an active Wesleyan in his younger days. Reflecting the influence of Methodist and Unitarian social reformers, he was an ardent advocate of self-improvement through education. He started his own working life as an apprentice bookbinder but a prudent marriage provided him with the funds to buy the bookbinding business. In his twenties, he continued his education through the mental improvement society based at the Liverpool Institute and by his thirties in the 1850s he had begun to write for the Liverpool press. Strongly anti-drink, he disturbed and perhaps titillated the readers of the *Liverpool mercury* by his descriptions of Liverpool's drinking dens, cheap music halls, dog fighting taverns and other haunts of vice. This collection of articles was later published as *Liverpool life* of 1857. His brutally frank portraits of Liverpool town councillors, *Pen and ink sketches* of 1857 and 1866 preceded his editorship of *Porcupine*. Through his journal, Shimmin campaigned tirelessly for sanitary reform and savagely attacked what he saw as 'municipal pomposity'. His often 'blunt' satire produced friends but probably many more enemies and he was briefly imprisoned in 1870 for libel, after accusing some of Liverpool's shipping interests of insurance fraud.¹⁴ His comic histories were very thinly, if at all, disguised critical, satirical commentaries on Liverpool politics.

Shimmin, writing some 30 years after *Dick Liver* appeared, saw himself essentially as a campaigning journalist. His comic history was but one arrow in his quiver. The early chapters indeed were not heavily political. The history was more of a light-hearted romp through the town's history, based on *Gore's directory*, which gave Shimmin the opportunity to throw in the occasional barbed comment on the contemporary political scene. Shimmin seemingly saw the history as a light-hearted diversion from his more heavyweight political journalism and to the extent that this approach was largely maintained until the final chapters, it was a comic history rather than a serious political satire. The tone of the early chapters was established in his comments on Liverpool's

¹⁴ John K. Walton and A. Wilcox, 'Hugh Shimmin', *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. John K. Walton and A. Wilcox, eds., *Low life and moral improvement in mid-Victorian Britain: Liverpool through the journalism of Hugh Shimmin* (Leicester, 1991).

early history. Shimmin noted early accounts of Liverpool, which argued a connection with St Patrick, claiming he sailed for Ireland from the Mersey in 666:

St Patrick, therefore, must have been a Liverpool man...The poet says the holy saint was a gentleman, and came of decent people, that is to say, of Liverpool people. Even in those early days a Liverpool gentleman was recognised as a superior personage.

Patrick was shipwrecked on the Isle of Man, 'a serious thing then, as the summer excursion trips at one shilling a head had not commenced'. All loyal Englishmen, he added, would argue that St Patrick was a Protestant, but when he got to Ireland 'the inhabitants must have confused him a great deal since instead of converting them, they converted him'. By and large, Shimmin concluded, there was little else to say about the history of Liverpool at this period. This was possibly a result of 'local jealousy and the spite of London and Manchester' but probably more because there was 'no Liverpool to write about'.¹⁵

Following Gore, Shimmin suggested that the first building on the Mersey was not in fact in Liverpool but rather was a castle at Runcorn, followed in the reign of Edward the Confessor by West Derby castle. Shimmin, who was not yet in his late Anglican phase, paused to remark of Edward that England was indebted to him for 'Puseyism, Broad Church, rood screens and other remarkable contrivances for disturbing the public mind'. West Derby provided an opportunity for some rather heavy-handed satire at the expense of the poor law guardians. Archaeologists had recently discovered a 'large red and baronial looking building' from which they heard 'shouts, shrieks, yells, hisses, stampings and the falling of heavy bodies'. The building proved to be the West Derby workhouse and the 'unearthly sounds proceeded from the board room where the guardians were engaged in their usual style of weekly discussion'.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Porcupine*, vol. 5, 6 June 1863.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 June 1863.

Shimmin sketched in Liverpool's development from its beginnings as 'a castle, three small cottages, a gallows and a pair of stocks', through the granting of King John's charter, to its confirmation as a free borough by Henry III, who had 'rather odd notions of freedom'. This led Shimmin to comment on the civil war then being fought in America. Henry's idea of freedom reminded him of the 'odd idea of some people in our own time who are fighting like fury for the right of free citizens to wallop their own niggers'.¹⁷

Romping through the middle ages, Shimmin lamented that the tower and beacon at Everton, monuments of Liverpool, had been long since swept away, for Liverpool did 'not care about antiquities', Liverpool men being 'men of sense and business'. If Liverpool had ruled Rome it would have swept away the 'rickety colosseum' and replaced it with a few 'smart, semi-detached villas'. Jerusalem would have been replaced by a 'new town on the model of Southport'.¹⁸

Shimmin's arrival at the sixteenth century produced his first comments on the dominant aristocratic families in the Liverpool area, the Stanley/Derby family of Knowsley and the Molyneux/Sefton family of Croxteth. Edward, Earl of Derby in 1523, was lauded as a 'charitable man' and an 'entire Poor Law, himself', who maintained 'at his own charge' 250 people in Liverpool. Direct comparison was made between this Edward and his namesake, the fourteenth earl, who had already served two terms as Prime Minister, in 1852 and 1858-59.¹⁹ Shimmin observed that a good deal of food was still distributed at Knowsley Hall and at the town hall, but the only ones to receive it were those who did not need it: 'Only the fat and the sleek, the well clothed and the purse proud are called to sit down and dine. How we do improve

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 and 20 June 1863.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 July 1863.

¹⁹ Edward Geoffrey Smith Stanley, fourteenth Earl of Derby, 1799-1869. He had at first entered parliament as a Whig but later joined the Conservatives and was party leader, 1846-68. In 1851, he succeeded his father as Earl of Derby. He was eventually Prime Minister on three occasions. During his final period of office, 1866-68, his government was responsible for the Reform Bill of 1867.

on the simple foolish ways of our forefathers!’²⁰ Shimmin later accused Derby of exploiting his position in Liverpool to build up his parliamentary following. He had managed to ‘convert the borough into a lever, by means of which to hoist certain friends and followers into parliamentary seats’.²¹

A favourite object of Shimmin’s scorn was the town council and its leading members. Particular targets were Alderman Cooper and the mayor, Roger Haydock. Cooper had already been ridiculed in *Pen and ink sketches* and there were frequent references to him and Haydock in the comic history. Shimmin suggested that they should take note of a corporation decree in 1571, which had stipulated that none of the queen’s subjects should be ‘frightened by monstrous beasts’. There were, he alleged, ‘monstrous beasts of advanced years’ lounging about in Bold and Lord Streets, ‘glowering under the bonnets and peeping at the ankles of respectable women’.²² In 1617, the corporation had further ordered that any person speaking ill of the mayor should forfeit his freedom. In heavily sarcastic tones, Shimmin agreed that there ought to be ‘just the same rule and then we should be rid of all those profane persons who attempted to make unseemly jokes about our mayors, their style and dignity’.²³

After the siege of Liverpool during the civil war, the corporation, with the ‘enlightenment and liberality which have always characterised that remarkable body of men’, provided for the education of Liverpool’s youth by donating two dictionaries to the public school. A worthy Liverpool alderman of the time had said that he ‘liked dictionaries better than other books – the words followed each other in a nice regular order – not in the confusing and irregular way as in other books’.²⁴ After a disputed election for parliament in 1694, the mayor, Alderman Norris, had been summoned to the bar of the House of Commons and imprisoned for seven weeks for electoral malpractice. This should be a warning to later mayors that ‘whenever an election comes on to be

²⁰ *Porcupine*, 11 July 1863.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1863.

²² *Ibid.*, 1 August 1863.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8 August 1863.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1863.

very sure that they return the right man'.²⁵ As for the election of the mayor himself, Shimmin, using the election of 1727 as his peg, commented, 'In all our progress we very much doubt whether our present mode of electing the mayor is a great improvement on the old style'. He would prefer the mayor to be chosen by an 'appeal to a popular voice' than by the hole in corner method of a caucus meeting.²⁶

As with Shepherd, Shimmin was concerned that Liverpool should come to terms with its past, particularly its leading role in the slave trade. Arriving at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Shimmin launched into the most sustained passage of savage invective in his history. The year 1709 saw an event which should be 'marked with the blackest of black stones'. In that year the first ship sailed for Africa from the port of Liverpool. If Liverpool were 'a sensitive place she would blush at the name of Africa. If the Liver were a fowl capable of feeling remorse of conscience he would bury his own beak in his breast'. He went on to ask, 'Are you penitent, sanguinary old Liverpool, plundering old pirate and slaver that you were, remorseless robber of gold and women, are you really penitent at last and resolved to do better?' He thought not. Half of Liverpool's merchants, he claimed, derived their hereditary fortunes from 'trading in black flesh'. But perhaps 'the chronicler forgets himself. Anti-slavery sentiments are not at all the tone in good society today and we will be fashionable though we perish for it'. Sardonicly, he added that he still hoped to be invited to dinner by the Southern club, the supporters of the southern states in the then-being-fought American civil war. Perhaps, he speculated, the 'good old trade may be opened again in Liverpool, now that we are getting rid of foolish sentimentalities and nigger on the brain. Who knows?' Liverpool had grown rich through the slave trade and she had 'not forgotten her gratitude or outlived her sympathy'.²⁷

Perhaps even more striking was a later extended comment. Liverpool had demonstrated its 'genius' by monopolising the slave trade. It must be some consolation to her to know that the 'whole of the wealth and commerce of the town originated with the slave

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 October 1863.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 November 1863.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31 October 1863.

trade'. Of course, there were losses to be taken into account. Sometimes 'a good many [slaves], especially the women, were found to have been crushed to death or stifled'. Sometimes also 'a fine stalwart piece of nigger-flesh was utterly spoiled by some break or sprain or rupture caused by careless packaging. This was very annoying, but there are of course drawbacks in any business'. Many of the Liverpool slave traders were pious church-goers and as long as the 'year's return of profits was satisfactory, they never gave way to ungrateful repining about a few slaves stifled more or less'. In fact the 'whole trade was so excellent that it would have been most unworthy to grumble over a few occasional losses'. However,

weak notions on this subject afterwards marred this splendid source of wealth. Some ridiculous nonsense about humanity and Christian brotherhood and the rights of the black began to get abroad – dangerous revolutionary doctrines, which unhappily prevailed for a while and stopped the slave trade.

Better times seemed to be coming round again and if 'public opinion only progresses in the direction it is now taking we have a good hope to see black men and women knocked down by auction at the cotton salesroom'.²⁸

Having completed his attack on Liverpool's mercantile elite, Shimmin seemingly grew tired of his history and abruptly concluded it before reaching the end of the eighteenth century. To pursue it any further, he suggested, would bring him into 'the domain of reality and a sort of disagreeable connection with the living'. But Liverpool grew. It built gaols and its 'prostitution increased in the most highly civilised fashion'. It grew rich and snobbish and was heavily taxed by whichever party was in power. In contrast to the gently playful approach he had adopted at the beginning of the history, he concluded it with another passage of harsh invective:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 December 1863.

As it was at first so Liverpool continues now. It loves money and trade and dining and controversy and cotton; it goes faithfully to church and on 'change every Sunday; it despised poor people, literary men, foreign patriots, abolitionists and all low creatures of that sort; it loves lords and adores princes, and it likes its theology hot, strong, and burning. It smokes, drinks, dines and chaffs.²⁹

Porcupine, if not Shimmin himself, produced a second comic history in 1877, two years before the editor's/proprietor's death. This second version uses the conceit of the history of the rise and fall of a flourishing civilisation in the great city of Lyve before the Roman conquest of the British Isles largely as a vehicle to attack Welsh 'jerry builders'. The founder of this civilisation, Caesar Darius Nicodemus Bierhead,³⁰ looking into the future 'as in a mirror' saw the city of the future:

It loomed up respectable in its bulk, stupendous in its own conception of itself and marvellous in its self sufficiency and imaginative power. It stood out boldly with its parks, and its gardens, and its docks and its shipping, and its bridges and its aqueducts and its workhouse committee.³¹

Over several chapters, the building of Bierhead's dream city is traced. The work is eventually completed by an unholy alliance of the town council, personified as Dick Cloghall, and Welsh jerry builders, represented by Jerry Shockhead, Cloghall's son-in-law. Cloghall's daughter, Flora, received Everton as her dowry on her marriage to Shockhead who

from making coffins and digging graves for the dead, took to raising shells for the living, a short residence in which has never failed to qualify them for the wooden shell and clay tenement through which whistle not the winds.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1864.

³⁰ Bierhead = coffinhead. The resonance with pier head is clear.

³¹ *Porcupine*, 13 January 1877.

Shockhead began jerry building, which became the 'trade of his descendants even unto the present day'. Jerry's 'speculation' proved to be a profitable one. He had discovered that to 'run up a human habitation it was not necessary to be too particular as to material or workmanship'. In fact, to 'make it pay with the least possible outlay, and without regard to consequences, was the primary object to be observed'.³²

Although eventually Cloghall was brought down and killed by his enemies, Shockhead evaded such a fate and died in his bed rather than 'dangling at the end of a rope'. This rather 'singular circumstance' only went to prove that the gods were 'extremely forgiving or they were woefully remiss in their duty'. Other lesser jerry builders were not so fortunate. As the great city of Lyve plunged towards its doom, an infuriated mob 'rushed to the several houses of the jerry builders and seizing ninety-seven of the unfortunate wretches, hung them in rows from the street lamps'. Whilst deploring this summary execution of the jerry builders as illegal, *Porcupine* suggested that perhaps it was a 'not wholly unmeritorious act'. However, the punishment of the jerry builders was not enough to save the great city of Lyve, which was reduced to a 'howling wilderness' by a great epidemic. The destruction of Lyve came about because of the 'culpable negligence of the authorities of the city in allowing the jerry builders to ply their nefarious trade so audaciously'. Lyve's fate was described in tones

³² Ibid., 17 and 24 February, 10 March 1877. The chronicler of the Welsh builders, A.R. Jones, argued that during the nineteenth century 'the Welsh took the lead in house building on Merseyside; many of them became prominent in the public life of the city and some amassed considerable wealth. They were skilled craftsmen, hard-working, thrifty and persevering, with a strong sense of organisation, which enabled them to succeed in large building undertakings'. The Welsh builders specialised in the 'terraced cottage type of house but it was with the age of cheap building and mass production that the real opportunity of the Welsh builder came...It has been said that the Liverpool Welsh builders had a reputation as jerry builders. If that means that the houses they erected were badly constructed, the charge is entirely unjust and unfounded. In all fairness to these pioneers, it should be explained that the term *jerry builder* merely meant builders who constructed buildings according to a ready made plan without initial reference to an architect'. A.R. Jones, *The Welsh builder on Merseyside: Annals and lives* (Liverpool, 1946), pp. 7-9.

and imagery redolent of the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The great city shrank before the 'touch' of the 'avenging sword of Nemesis'. What Lyve might have become were it not for 'Death's jackal, the jerry builder' it was useless to surmise.³³

The Welsh jerry builder, along with a number of other liberal *bêtes noires*, was also targeted by the *Liverpool review's* 1883 comic history of Liverpool. Appearing in the last years of Conservative ascendancy, nationally and locally, the comic history allowed the Liberal-supporting *Review* to engage in literary guerrilla warfare with its Conservative opponents in Liverpool. The Welsh jerry builder, perhaps a little strangely because of Welsh non-conformity's links with Liberal politics, as with *Porcupine* half a dozen years earlier, came under fierce attack. The history of jerry building in Liverpool went back to its origins when King John had used it as a port of departure for Ireland. He had thrown up a few huts made of West Derby oak. They were certainly primitive but 'quite as permanent as the erections of the modern Welshman'.³⁴ The first Welshman, David ap Griffith, did not make an appearance in the annals of Liverpool until the last years of the fifteenth century. 'In these days', commented the *Review*, 'we know the Welshman principally as a jerry builder', although there was no reason to believe that ap Griffith was such.³⁵

At the end of the sixteenth century, the mayor and the council in an attempt to improve the commercial and social life of Liverpool had regulated the strength and price of beer. The *Review* thought that a comparable contemporary regulation would involve an attempt to 'interfere with business of the jerry builder'. One step should be to stipulate the thickness of the walls of dwelling houses. If the wall were built 'too slightly' they should be pulled down by order of the council. They should then be rebuilt 'under official supervision and in a proper and substantial manner'. If such a regulation had been introduced and enforced 'half at least of contemporary Liverpool would still be non-existent'. However, progress, 'wisely recognising the logic of accomplished facts and the impossibility of resisting the march of events, has taken the

³³ *Porcupine*, 24 March, 7, 14 and 28 April 1877.

³⁴ *The Liverpool review*, 25 August 1883.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 October 1883.

jerry builder to her capacious bosom and condoned all his faults'. This was for the sake of the 'temporary accommodation – temporary in every sense of the word', which the jerry builder offered Liverpool to solve her immediate pressing housing problems.³⁶

The newly re-branded *Liverpool review* marked its new existence and its transformation from the *Liberal review* in 1883 by running its own serial comic history of Liverpool. *The Liverpool review of politics, society, literature and art* appeared weekly from 1883 to 1904, its predecessor the *Liberal review* having started five years earlier in 1878. It was explicitly a journal of liberal views and politics, seeing itself in direct confrontation with the then Conservative domination of Liverpool politics. The comic history genre was seen as an ideal vehicle for attacking the Tories, present and past, and their control of Liverpool politics. Significantly, its serial history, running for over two years, began in the first issue of the revamped journal in 1883.

The *Review's* major targets were those whom it judged had dominated and profited from the exercise of political power in Liverpool. Centre stage in this respect were the Stanleys, the Derby family, and to a lesser extent their aristocratic co-predators and rivals the Molyneuxs, the Sefton family. The Stanleys had first exercised power in Liverpool in the reign of Henry III. The history of

the connection of the Derby family with Liverpool begins, therefore, pretty early, and it may be added it has continued to the present day, much to the profit of the family, if not of Liverpool.

Liverpool had made a substantial contribution to the wealth of the Derby family without, however, receiving 'any appreciable advantage' in return.³⁷ By the fifteenth century, Liverpool was torn between the rivalry of the Stanleys and the Molyneuxs, almost its own Montagues and Capulets, although Romeo and Juliet were nowhere in evidence.³⁸ During the Wars of the Roses, the rival

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 July 1884.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 September 1883.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 October 1883.

families had fought on the same side but only because they found this ‘more profitable than fighting each other on the streets of Liverpool’. After the defeat of the Lancastrian dynasty, the Stanleys got control of the borough of Liverpool and the Molyneuxs were compensated with the royal forests and parks in West Derby. The luck of the two families continued under Richard III, that ‘murderous monarch’, who considered their support essential.³⁹ The Molyneuxs and the Stanleys continued to make ‘rather a good thing out of Liverpool’, although there was no evidence to suggest that Liverpool had ‘any particular reason to be grateful for the existence of the families in question’.⁴⁰

The conflict between Sir Richard Molyneux, a Catholic, and the Protestant-controlled corporation over the town’s revenues in the reign of Edward VI led the *Review*, in pulpit fashion, to intone,

The religious zeal which impels people to deny the civil even moral rights of their neighbours, and cheat and rob in the name of righteousness was a common rule of life in the sixteenth century.

Such zeal had not entirely disappeared, even in ‘this era of enlightenment and progress’. There was an ‘irresistible temptation to poor frail humanity’ in feeling that heaven was being served while one’s own pockets were being filled.⁴¹ In the same century, Liverpool had had the ‘privilege’ of returning two members to parliament but had not exercised it; instead they had handed the ‘privilege’ over to the Derbys, who used it in their own interest. ‘In the care of “number one” indeed the family just mentioned has always shown transcendent ability’. If proof were needed of this, it could be found in ‘the Liverpool of today, which contributed so largely to the Derby rent roll’.⁴²

The earls of Derby had always been ‘among the early birds’. They knew where to pick up the worms and had done so

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 October 1883.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1883.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8 December 1883

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12 January 1884.

'rather extensively in Liverpool and Bootle'.⁴³ The care of 'number one' had 'always distinguished the family'.⁴⁴ In this matter there had never been

any change in the Derbys, male or female, and even those who have married into the family seem thereby to have acquired its main characteristic, the results of which we see in the princely pensions of the present day.

'Change' may be a reference to Derby's recent switch of political allegiance from the Conservative to the Liberal party.⁴⁵

The *Review* accused the two families of failing to support Liverpool in the growing competition with Manchester centred on the proposed Manchester Ship Canal, which was eventually opened in 1894. In the competition in the sixteenth century between Liverpool and Chester, the then earl of Derby had supported Liverpool. In the current competition with Manchester, however, 'neither Knowsley nor Croxteth had shown any disposition to champion the cause of the city which has made them what they are'. If the Mersey were to be 'closed to commerce' that would result in the end of the 'stream of gold which until now has passed steadily into the Knowsley and Croxteth coffers'. The two families had 'fattened' on Liverpool very much in the same way the 'the leach does upon its victim'. It was only thanks to the robust constitution of the victim that it had 'survived the operation'. Any current attachment between the Derby family and Liverpool was a 'purely business-like' arrangement and the 'advantages of the connection are certainly

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26 January 1884.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 February 1884.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1884. This sustained attack on the Derbys by the liberal *Review* in 1884 is perhaps a little surprising in that the fifteenth earl, Edward Henry Stanley (1826-93), was secretary of state for the colonies, 1882-85, in the Liberal government. He had started his political life as a Conservative and had been Conservative M.P. for Kings Lynn from 1848 until his accession to the title in 1869. He served as foreign secretary in Conservative administrations, 1866-1868, when his father had been Prime Minister, and again in 1874-78. He joined the Liberal Party in 1880.

not on the side of Liverpool'. The same could be said 'with equal truth' of the Seftons of Croxteth.⁴⁶

The other political *bête noire* of the *Review's* comic history was the local Conservative grandee, Arthur Bowyer Forwood, chairman of the Liverpool constitutional association, later M.P. for Ormskirk and the dominant figure in Liverpool Conservative politics at this time. The attack on Forwood was not as sustained as that on the Derby and Sefton families but no less vitriolic. Looking for a suitable comparison, the *Review* used the Liverpool burgesses of 1584 who had allowed themselves to be deprived of their rights by the corporation. But how much wiser were the citizens of Liverpool in the 1880s? 'Do they not submit to, or rather, acquiesce in the practical despotism of Mr A.B. Forwood?' Aldermen, such as Forwood, not only ruled the council; 'They are the council and they are self-elected'. But 'admirers of strength or brute force' would continue to put their trust in Forwood because of his 'unscrupulousness in riding roughshod over all opposition'.⁴⁷ The office of alderman seemed to be an 'act of pure self creation'. But it was probably unwise to enquire too closely into the origins of the system, as it had given Liverpool A.B. Forwood and 'when we recognise the astuteness with which A.B. Forwood manipulates his mechanical majority, we may find in these things sufficient justification for the existence of aldermen'.⁴⁸ The current aldermen, just like their predecessors at the beginning of the eighteenth century, were probably happy to exercise 'extraordinary powers' so long as Forwood was prepared to take the lead. He, however, was 'much too astute and practical a politician and too much in harmony with his age to make any such mistake'.⁴⁹

A long-running concern of municipal reformers in Liverpool in the nineteenth century was the 'health of the town'. Liverpool's unenviable reputation for bad housing and even worse sanitation had been firmly established since the critiques of Dr William Duncan, Liverpool's first medical officer of health in the 1840s. The comic history, however, argued that that reputation dated back to the mid sixteenth century and had been justified 'so

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 June and 2 August 1884, 2 May 1885.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 and 28 June 1884.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1884.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1885.

firmly ever since'. The health committee of the town council, charged with sanitary reform, had nevertheless 'revered the wisdom and followed in the footsteps of their ancestors'. The net result was that the death rate in Liverpool 'will now stand comparison for height with that of any other large centre of population in the kingdom'.⁵⁰ But possibly the less that was said about the health committee the 'better chance we shall have of preserving a calm and judicial frame of mind'.⁵¹

The *Review*, as with Shimmin and Shepherd, was anxious that Liverpool should acknowledge the source of its nineteenth-century prosperity. The foundations of that prosperity, it argued, were laid in its 'connection with the West Indies, which began through the apparently innocent medium of Manchester goods and culminated about half a century later in the iniquitous slave trade'. The eighteenth century actor, Cooke, it claimed, was not far from the truth when he had said at the old Theatre Royal in Williamson Square that 'there was not brick in Liverpool that was not cemented with the blood of a slave'.⁵² In the final chapter of its comic history in 1885, the *Review* found it difficult to understand the 'state of feeling of those who engaged in this traffic with an undisturbed conviction that it was perfectly legitimate and honourable', a belief in which they were encouraged by their religious teachers.⁵³

The comic history, or at least the version of the genre favoured by its practitioners in nineteenth-century Liverpool, was essentially ephemeral; it was of the day, or week, and often merely for the day. Shepherd's comic history did make it to hard covers, but even then it was a 30-page pamphlet, to be used as a weapon in the political disputes associated with the causes of parliamentary and municipal reform in the 1830s, rather than as a volume for reflective reading. *Porcupine* and the *Liverpool review* were happy and comfortable with the weekly serial format, which allowed them to adjust their sights as new targets advanced or retreated. Comic history as practised here was a form of political narrative. It provided a convenient structure for a scatter-gun type of satirical

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1883.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1883.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30 May 1885.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 26 September 1885.

approach. The writer was not compelled to focus on a restricted target, although there were examples of sustained attack, as for example Shimmin's on Liverpool's gains from the slave trade. Usually, however, the format allowed the writer to attack a whole series of targets in one chapter. The serial format also allowed the satirist to return as often as was wished to the attack on a particular target, as for example with the *Liverpool review* and the Derby family. The format also allowed the authors a great deal of latitude in matters of tone and style. The comic history format allowed Shepherd, described by his biographer as 'rollicking', to indulge his penchant for a little political knockabout, albeit with serious undertones. Although a Unitarian minister of a relatively small chapel, he enjoyed the bigger stage than his pulpit offered by politics, and his lightness of touch was probably accompanied by a mischievous grin. Shimmin was altogether more bitingly sarcastic, if not necessarily more serious and, as a political and campaigning journalist, comic history was but one weapon in his armoury. Comic history is perhaps in his case a misnomer. The same could also be argued for the *Liverpool review*, where there was little attempt at light-hearted fun. Its approach was certainly that associated with serious-minded nineteenth-century political journals. Again, as with *Porcupine*, comic history was one weapon among many to be used against the enemies of the causes it favoured.