Humbug and a 'Welsh Hindoo': A Small History of Begging, Race and Language in Mid-Nineteenth Century Liverpool[1]

On 15 May 1849, the *Liverpool Mercury* published a short article entitled 'A Religious Fraud'. It stated:

> A Lascar, who perambulates the town with tracts, and endeavours to make the public believe that he is a converted Hindoo, was brought up yesterday, charged with being drunk and disorderly. The would-be saint was ordered to pay 5s for the unrighteous act, or be imprisoned for three days.[2]

Three days later, the same newspaper published the following letter:

> As your paper is the most powerful opponent of imposture and fraud in this town, I send you the following case. The other night I was in an inn near Clayton-square, when an apparent Lascar entered the room, offering for sale sheets of doggerel hymns. Having seen a paragraph in Tuesday's *Mercury* that one of the same cloth, who pretended to be a converted Hindoo, had lately been found drunk and fined five shillings, I, in a freak, pointing to the door, said in Welsh, 'Get out; no one wants you here.' Judge my surprise when he answered me, in a mixture of broken Welsh and gibberish, the purport of which I could not catch; but I suspected that he was 'not born at home,' and wishing to know more of him I said, 'Come, sit down, and take a glass of ale with me.' The bait was too tempting, with a grin and a shrug, *à la Francaise*, he complied. When I proceeded 'You understand Welsh; tell me the truth, where were you born?' he replied, in good Welsh, 'I was born in Bombay!' 'No nonsense with a countryman,' said I, 'I know better; you and I are countrymen. I admire a clever man whatever colour he may assume, and you are the cleverest Welshman that ever I met with; give me your hand, and tell me the real truth.' 'Well, well,' said he, laughing, 'I come from Beaumaris.' 'Do you find trade better in chintz and moustaches, than with a clean face, grey cloth, and corduroy?' 'O yes,' said he, 'a thousand times better.' We afterwards conversed upon various subjects. The skin and hair were perfect in

[1] I am grateful to Simon Brooks, Darren Chetty, Lucinda Matthews-Jones, Louise Miskell and Bethan Tovey-Walsh for their advice on this paper.
[2] 'A Religious Fraud', *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 May 1849, p. 4.

> colour, but the latter was too wiry for a Hindoo; the eyes, teeth, and general features, and even the hands, would pass for oriental, even in the Carnatic. I have often heard strange tales of Welsh American Indians, but I think that I may claim the honour of first discovering a Welsh Hin-doo. Really, gentlemen, this is the age of humbug.[3]

It was signed ‘Y Cymro’, which translates as the Welshman.

Thus, it appears, that in Liverpool in 1849, there was a Welshman going around, pretending to be South Asian in order to sell hymn sheets. The story was considered interesting or significant enough for it to be republished in various forms in at least thirteen different newspapers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.[4]

Small histories

At one level, this is just a humorous story, a passing incident with little consequence or significance. However, this curious episode in a Liverpool inn is also ripe with potential as microhistory. This is the study of an event or a few documents in the smallest possible detail with the intention of challenging the generalisations of wider broad historical narratives.[5] It is an approach influenced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s idea of ‘thick description’, where practices are explored in detail in search of the symbolic meaning behind them.[6] In many ways it is just a different term for what Robert Darnton did in his seminal *The Great Cat Massacre*, an attempt to gain an insight into the mentalities of the past by analysing one event and the way people behaved within it.[7] Whatever its intellectual influences, microhistory has been particularly important for understanding the lived experiences of those outside the elite

[3] ‘A Welsh Hindoo in Liverpool’, *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 May 1849, p. 6.
[4] *Bolton Chronicle,* 19 May 1849, p. 3. *Liverpool Standard*, 22 May 1849, p. 3. *Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette*, 25 May 1849, p. 7. *North Wales Chronicle and Advertiser for the Principality*, 22 May 1849, p .3. *The Welshman*, 1 June 1849, p. 4. *Pembrokeshire Herald and General Advertiser*, 1 June 1849, p. 4. *Tyrone Constitution*, 1 June 1849, p. 4. *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian,* 2 June 1849, p. 2. *Dundee Courier*, 6 June 1849, p. 3. *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 2 June 1849, p. 2. *Gloucester Journal*, 30 June 1849, p. 1. *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser*, 30 May 1849, p. 4. *Athlone Sentinel*, 30 May 1849, p. 4.
[5] For a discussion of its worth see István Szijártó, ‘Four Arguments for Microhistory’, *Rethinking History*, 6, 2 (2002), 209-15.
[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[7] Robert Darnton, *The Great Car Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

because, as Ann Rigney argued, anecdotal or seemingly trivial incidents can often be the only way to investigate those who leave no or little documentation behind.[8]

More recently, Julia Laite has recast microhistory as small history.[9] This is a reaction to calls for 'big histories', where complex ideas are explored across different places and periods, often to tease out the relevance of the past to contemporary questions. Rather than seeing the study of a few documents or a single incident as trivial, advocates of micro and small history argue that this approach emphasises humanist perspectives and allows the complexities and nuances of the past to be filled out and illustrated. Micro or small history sheds light on how 'big' trends shaped individual lives and how concepts, discourses and ideas translated into lived experiences. It offers an opportunity to explore the intersection of different identities, lifecycles and structural forces at the level of the individual. In this sense, it does not just seek to challenge the broad generalisations of historical narratives but add layer, nuance and depth to them.[10]

The term 'small history' is also a product of how digitization is changing historical practice. Digitization has made the process of browsing and exploring large numbers of documents at speed much easier. In particular, it allows newspapers, brimming with rich anecdotes that illustrate the diversity and above all human nature of the past, to be explored and utilized at much larger scale than with microfilms or bound hard copies.[11] Individuals that appear in these stories can then be traced in other archives, adding flesh and detail to the names in newspaper reports. Building up a picture of the contexts that individuals lived in has also become much easier. As Laite has concluded, 'Digital history illuminates small details within complex contexts at great speed'.[12]

Digitized newspapers have been particular important in taking forward the histories of people of colour in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. As the pioneering work of Caroline Bressey has shown, searching for racial terms brings into view many individuals who would

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[8] Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), p. 10.

[9] Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age', *Journal of Social History*, 53, 4 (2020), 963-989.

[10] One of the best examples of this approach is Amy Stanley, 'Maidservants' tales: narrating domestic and global history in Eurasia, 1600-1900', *American Historical Review*, 121, 2 (2016), 437-60.

[11] For a recent consideration of how digitization is changing historical practice see Lara Putnam, 'The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast', *American Historical Review*, 121, 2 (2016), 377-402.

[12] Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch', p. 970.

otherwise be lost in the vastness of the written record. This enables preconceptions about the whiteness of past British society to be further challenged but also a better understanding of how people of colour were racialized in legal, employment and everyday settings. Of course, there are challenges to this method. It does not return incidents where the reporting of people of colour was not racialized and the examples that are uncovered are often missing key details.[13]

It was through digitally searching for discussions of the Welsh language in English newspapers that I stumbled across the story of the 'Welsh Hindoo'. Like many topics chosen for micro or small history, it is a strange, intriguing and uncertain tale. As with so many racialized histories, key details are lacking. Who was the 'Hindoo' and how was he passing as an Indian seafarer? Had he coloured his skin? Why did he regard passing as an Indian as a useful sales technique? Why did the letter writer confront the man in Welsh? What was meant by an age of humbug? Did the incident even happen?

In these questions lie clues or answers to much wider historical issues. The persons involved are unknowable but their encounter provides insights into a cultural context. A 'small history' of this passing moment offers an opportunity to explore the dynamics of class, language and race in the middle of the nineteenth century. The 1840s has been seen as a key decade in the biologizing of race. However, as Mandler has argued, such arguments often depend on suppositions about the impact and representativeness of key intellectual texts that discussed race. He maintained that it cannot be assumed that texts had the influence the writers sought and thus called on historians to locate 'discourses more firmly in the conditions of their production and reception'.[14] Mundane encounters between peoples of different colour are one way of doing that and exploring what race meant in everyday rather than intellectual spheres. Yet this is rarely pursued and Tabili argued that historians have been more interested in '[n]otorious episodes of conflict' than 'daily interactions between migrants and natives'.[15]

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[13] Caroline Bressey, 'Surfacing black and brown bodies in the digital archive: domestic workers in late nineteenth-century Australia', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 70 (2020), 1-11 and Caroline Bressey, 'Looking for Work: The Black Presence in Britain 1860–1920', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 28, 2-3 (2010), 164-182,

[14] Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History', *Cultural and Social History*, 1, 1 (2004), 94-117, quote from p. 113.

[15] Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 6.

Such interactions were rarely shaped solely by racial thinking and the Liverpool encounter also offers an opportunity to think through how class interacted with race and intersectionality as a lived experience. It reveals something of the anxieties the middle classes had around their position in society and whether their goodwill was being exploited by the poor. Since people of colour tended to be poor this is especially relevant for understanding racial dynamics. White migrants to England also faced a coalition of prejudices, particularly when they were not fluent in English. The idea of Britain as an English-speaking world is both Anglocentric and misleading. Welsh-speaking communities in Wales have been acknowledged but a microhistory of an everyday encounter can add texture and a mundane humanity to accounts otherwise often dominated by institutions, public celebrations and census statistics. A small history of how a Welsh-speaker behaved when faced with another migrant also reveals something of the survival strategies both pursued. The working classes and people of colour were not without agency, however they were thought about by those whose attitudes and power shaped and constrained their lives. Yet many of these interpretations rely on contextualization and supposition and small histories are also reminders of the contingency and uncertainty of historical interpretation. Of course, all historians know this, but a detailed study of a single event throws it into sharp relief in a way that broader histories do not. In such writing, the range of evidence, events, and discourses obscures what is not known. In a small history, the unknown cannot be avoided.

1 The rich, the poor and humbug

Liverpool in the 1840s was home to nearly a quarter of million people. It was the second city of the Empire, a bustling commercial hub for transatlantic shipping and a melting pot of different classes and cultures. The city centre, where the inn was, had no segregation of rich and poor.[16] Thus poverty, prostitution, pawnbrokers and the like all existed in close proximity to the wealthy, making a host of different kinds of encounters between the classes commonplace, including those centred on begging. For the poor, begging was a means to survival and of avoiding the workhouse. It might be indulged in constantly or just when circumstances forced it. Begging made use of the better off's sense of Christian duty to help the less fortunate. It pricked their consciences and was an uncomfortable reminder of the

[16] John Belchem, 'Liverpool in 1848: Image, Identity and Issues', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 147 (1997), 1-26.

inequalities of society.[17] But such feelings co-existed with suspicions around the honesty and industriousness of the poor. There was a widespread sense that the poor could not be trusted and that some were exploiting the generosity of those who gave alms and paid for poor relief.[18] Indeed, the 1834 Poor Law was designed around a belief in the need for a deterrent for those who would rather not work if they could live off others.[19]

In the 1840s hostility towards begging intensified. There had been a significant rise in begging and vagrancy because of the numbers who had fled the Irish famine and how the new Poor Law was driving those who wanted to avoid the workhouse away from their native parish. Beggars and vagrants were increasingly vilified as dishonest and 'idle and depraved' and there was some fear that they were spreading disease. Croley has concluded that journalists and social commentators began 'to conceive of vagrants and beggars as waging an organized and deliberate assault on the rest of the populace'.[20]

Begging could be made more respectable by dressing it up as a different kind of transaction. Street hawkers did sell goods that people wanted but some of their items could be more pretence than valuable. Religious tracts might fall into this category. They were cheap and sensational and distributed to hawkers by religious charities. Although intended to spread Christian messages to the poorly-educated working classes, tracts were also seen by these religious charities as a way of helping the impoverished sellers to whom they might be given rather than sold.[21] Thus neither the hawkers nor the tracts were always seen as respectable and it is notable that 'Y Cymro' dismissively described the ones being sold by the 'Welsh Hindoo' as doggerel. Mayhew's classic if prejudiced 1840s study of the London poor said of

[17] The historiography of Victorian philanthropy often emphasises what the giver derived from giving but Flew has recently argued for the importance of remembering how faith and personal impulses were also important. Sarah Flew, 'Unveiling the Anonymous Philanthropist: Charity in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20, 1 (2015), 20-33.
[18] On the consequent hostility to beggars see M. J. D. Roberts, 'Reshaping the Gift Relationship: The London Mendicity Society and the Suppression of Begging in England 1818-1869', *International Review of Social History*, 36, 2 (1991), 201-31.
[19] For a review of current understandings of the New Poor Law see Steven King, 'Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 5-19.
[20] Laura Sagolla Croley, 'A Working Distinction: Vagrants, Beggars, and the Laboring Poor in Mid-Victorian England', *Prose Studies*, 18, 1 (1995), 74-104, quotes from p. 75 and p. 79. For the experience of the Irish refugees themselves see Lewis Darwen, Donald MacRaild, Brian Gurrin, Liam Kennedy, ''Unhappy and Wretched Creatures': Charity, Poor Relief and Pauper Removal in Britain and Ireland during the Great Famine', *English Historical Review*, 134, 568 (2019), 589-619.
[21] Joseph Stubenrauch, 'Silent Preachers in the Age of Ingenuity: Faith, Commerce, and Religious Tracts in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Church History*, 80, 2 (2011), 251-80.

religious tract sellers: ‘With some men and boys, I am informed, tract-selling is but a pretext for begging’.[22]

Anxieties around the dishonesty of beggars are evident in how other newspapers’ shorter retellings of the Liverpool incident focussed on the issue of deception. The *Bristol Times and Mirror* headed its version, ‘Beggar in Masquerade’.[23] The *Liverpool Standard*’s account read: ‘A pretended Hindoo is at present begging in Liverpool. He is a native of Wales, and has coloured his face and dressed in Chintz, the better to obtain alms.’[24]

It is not absolutely clear from the original letter that the man had coloured his skin. It maybe that the ‘Welsh Hindoo’ simply had a dark complexion or perhaps was of South Asian or mixed-race heritage. There is limited evidence of people of colour in north Wales in the eighteenth century and it is far from impossible that there were people of colour in mid nineteenth-century Anglesey, the north Wales island that the beggar said he came from.[25] Yet there is also contextual evidence that colouring the skin did occur. Street performers were known to ‘black up’ in this era but no one actually believed these minstrels were black.[26] There were, however, claims in one 1862 study of the poor that, ‘Some years ago’, it had been ‘common’ to see black beggars, usually American, with wood cuts depicting bound slaves with the wording ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ The author claimed, ‘At the time that the suppression of the slave trade created so much excitement, this was so excellent a ‘dodge’ that many white beggars, fortunate to possess a flattish or turned-up nose, dyed themselves black and ‘stood pad’ as real Africans. The imposture, however, was soon detected and punished.’[27]

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[22] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor,* vol 1 (London: Griffin, Bohn and Co, 1861), pp. 241-2.
[23] *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 2 June 1849, p. 2
[24] *Liverpool Standard*, 22 May 1849, p. 3.
[25] David Morris, ‘Identifying the Black Presence in Eighteenth-century Wales’, *Llafur*, 10, 1 (2008), 11-20. Chater’s extensive survey does, however, conclude that there seems to have been ‘comparatively few’ black people in Wales in the long eighteenth century. Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the period of the British Slave Trade, c.1660-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 28.
[26] Tom Scriven, ‘The Jim Crow Craze in London’s Press and Streets, 1836 -39’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19, 1 (2014), 93-109. George F. Rehin, ‘Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London and its Resorts: Popular Culture and its Racial Connotations as revealed in Polite Opinion’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15, 1 (1981), 19-38.
[27] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: Those that Will not Work* (London: Griffin, Bohn and Co., 1862), p. 425.

Concerns around fraudulent beggars go back to the medieval period.[28] Amidst the 1840s hostility towards begging, such anxieties may have intensified and this surely explains why the 'Welsh Hindoo' was told angrily by 'Y Cymro' to leave the inn even before the 'Hindoo's' Welshness was known. His admittance that he was in 'a freak' is also indicative of how unsettling the anxieties around fraudulent begging were. They were emotions as much as opinions. This might partly be rooted in something as simple as not liking being taken advantage of. But there was something deeper at play too. Giving to the poor was at least partially a religious act. Heaven and hell were not simply abstract conceptions but places where one would spend eternity according to one's choices. They had significant influences on economic behaviour such as charitable work and thus if a gift to a beggar in need turned out to be based on a fraud then an act that would help atone for sins and guide the doer to eternal salvation was void.[29]

Such anxieties produced a fascination with imposter stories such as the 'Welsh Hindoo'. These could be deeply disconcerting because they forced people to realise that the world was not what it might seem and challenged the wider notion of the age as one of progress. McWilliam has even argued that imposters unsettled Victorian society because they were 'a reminder that identity was not so much stable as a form of performance or (even more terrifying) that there was no such thing as the individual self'.[30] More broadly, Natalie Zemon Davis has argued that they were used to stress the concerns of an age.[31]

The same is true of all concerns around authenticity; individual incidents of dishonesty or deception could be seen as emblematic of a wider condition hence 'Y Cymro's' conclusion that this was 'the age of humbug'. He was not alone. The phrase 'age of humbug' can be found in a handful of other newspaper reports from the 1840s and 1850s, where it was used to describe everything from the behaviour of women, children, politicians and peers,[32]

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[28] Irina Metzler, *Disability, Fraudulent Beggars and Medieval Surveillance*. https://irinametzler.org/2013/09/10/disability-fraudulent-beggars-and-medieval-surveillance/ (accessed: 27 May 2020).

[29] On the influence of the need for atonement see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[30] Rohan McWilliam, 'Unauthorised Identities: The Impostor, the Fake and the Secret History in nineteenth century Britain', in Margot Finn, Michael Lobban & Jenny Bourne Taylor (eds.), *Legitimacy and Illegitimacy in Nineteenth-Century Law, Literature and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010),67-92, quote from p. 87.

[31] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Remaking Impostors: From Martin Guerre to Sommersby* (London: Royal Holloway/University of London, 1997), p. 8.

[32] 'The Age of Humbug', *Morning Post*, 5 May 1857, p. 3.

to the Anti-Corn Law League,[33] and job testimonials.[34] Another use of the term was in the context of the treatment of the poor by the rich. A writer in the *Evening Mail* in 1843 claimed that the Poor Law and societies to relieve poverty replaced real sympathy, kindness and charity with a parsimonious maintenance intended to ensure only real want was relieved and dissolute idleness was not encouraged. For this writer, what was needed was not to make the relief of poverty harsh but to erase poverty itself through better wages and interaction between the classes. For him, this should be the duty of those able to help.[35]

The Liverpool incident suggests his diagnosis was not unreasonable; however, his cure was not going to gain currency as long as there was a distrust of the poor and the publishing and republishing of this story surely fed that distrust. It can be seen an example of what Begiato described as the use of the workers by the middle classes to 'think with'. This was where the latter used perceptions of the former to reinforce their own values and sense of identity.[36] By telling and reading the story, the sense of moral superiority over the poor was confirmed. So too was the appropriateness of poor relief being based around not rewarding those in need. Indeed, the whole incident can be considered a performance of such class prejudices. Here was a man wealthy enough to buy a stranger a drink and educated enough to write a fluent and witty letter to a newspaper, dismissing a beggar in anger. It is an illustration of how the condemnatory rhetoric around begging was not just in the newspapers but something that translated into interactions on the street and other public places. It is evidence of how begging must often have been a humiliating experience. And it was perhaps in places like 1840s Liverpool, crowded with Irish famine refugees, that beggars were most likely to receive harsh words from those they sought help from.

2 Welshness in Liverpool

'Y Cymro' presumably had no expectation that the 'Hindoo' would understand Welsh but that was the language he employed to tell the man to leave the inn. It maybe that this was simply because Welsh was 'Y Cymro's' first language and it was what came naturally to him, particularly when angry. It may be that he was with other Welsh speakers and just carrying on in the language he was already speaking in. However, in multilingual contexts, which

[33] 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Dublin Morning Register*, 4 January 1843, p. 3.
[34] 'The working men's Sunday services', *Liverpool Mercury*, 2 March 1855, p. 14.
[35] *Evening Mail*, 16 January 1843, p. 4.
[36] Joanne Begiato, *Manliness in Britain, 1760–1900: Bodies, Emotion, and Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 4-5.

language someone employed in public was always significant. As sociolinguists have shown, different languages in such settings have different associations and meanings and language choice draws upon this, providing an opportunity for signalling inclusion and exclusion from groups and identities.[37]

Despite being in England, Liverpool was a multilingual city and Welsh was part of its cultural fabric. Liverpool was not just a vibrant port but also an important market for Welsh goods and a source for products sold in north Wales. These economic connections drew Welsh labourers and merchants into the city and in 1813 there were estimates that there were 10,000 Welsh people in Liverpool, which would represent ten percent of the population.[38] Liverpool's economic importance to Wales was furthered by the construction of the Chester and Holyhead Railway which opened in 1848 and linked Anglesey, where the 'Hindoo' said he came from, to the north of England. By the 1851 census, there were 20,262 Welsh-born people living in Liverpool.[39] To all intents and purposes, the city was the capital of north Wales.

At this time, probably three-quarters of Wales' population spoke Welsh, which suggests that the vast majority of Welsh people in Liverpool were able to do so.[40] However, language ability and language use are not the same thing and evidence of how Welsh was employed in the lives of migrants and their children remains sketchy. There is certainly evidence of Welsh continuing as the language of the home, at least for first-generation migrants. However, intermarriage with the host population and generational change all undermined Welsh as a domestic language in England.[41]

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[37] For a study of how this works in practice and a discussion of the relevant literature see Maria-Carme Torras and Joseph Gafaranga, 'Social Identities and Language Alternation in Non-Formal Institutional Bilingual Talk: Trilingual Service Encounters in Barcelona', *Language in Society*, 31, 4 (2002), 527-48.

[38] Mike Benbough-Jackson, 'Welsh Migrants and Performance in Early Nineteenth-Century Liverpool', *Transaction of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 158 (2009), 59-84, pp. 64-65.

[39] Colin G. Pooley, 'The Residential Segregation of Migrant Communities in mid Victorian Liverpool', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2 (1977), p. 366.

[40] Not until 1891 did the census count the number of Welsh speakers in Wales. For the history of Welsh in this period see Geraint H. Jenkins (ed), *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Cardiff: UWP, 1998).

[41] Emrys Jones, 'The Welsh Language in England, c.1800-1914', in Geraint H. Jenkins (ed), *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Cardiff: UWP, 1998), 231-59.

The historiography paints a picture of Welsh migrants as assimilating into English society with little difficulty.[42] Learning the host language was key to assimilation and this had obvious status and economic benefits for any migrant group. Welsh assimilation may also have been encouraged by the growing hostility towards the rising number of poor Irish migrants in Liverpool after the potato famine. As Belcher has argued, this meant 'Amiable amusement gave way to crude and pejorative ethnic stereotyping' of the Irish.[43] Thus, in the same month as the Liverpool inn incident, the press was reporting representations to the Home Secretary complaining of the burden of Irish migrants on the public purse in the city, and that they were a 'crying nuisance', infecting 'the place with a most malignant pestilence'. It called for Irish paupers to be removed to Ireland and charged as rogues and vagabonds if they returned.[44] Some historians have pointed to how such hostility was not universal or generally rooted in an idea of the Irish as a different race but the coalescence of prejudices towards poverty and Catholicism meant anti-Irishness was still very real.[45] There is tentative evidence of similar prejudices towards the Welsh. In the middle of the century some advertisements for servants or cooks contained the line 'No Irish or Welsh need apply' or even just 'No Welsh need apply'.[46] Occasionally, more general hostile moral judgments were made against the Welsh. In 1847 an inquiry into education had lambasted the Welsh language, and, more substantially, Welsh morality. This was also the era of the Welsh Not, a wooden symbol sometimes given to some children for speaking their mother tongue at school, which would lead to physical punishment, and, according to some contemporary

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[42] For work on the Welsh in England see Colin G. Pooley, 'Welsh Migration to England in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 9, 3 (1983), 287-306. D. Ben Rees, *Hanes Rhefeddol Cymry Lerpwl* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2019). Joan Allen and Richard C Allen**,** 'Competing identities': Irish and Welsh migration and the North-East of England', in Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard (eds) *Regional Identities in North-East England 1300–2000* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), 133-60. Richard Lewis and David Ward, 'Culture, Politics and Assimilation: the Welsh on Teesside, c. 1850-1940', *Welsh History Review*, 17 (1995), 550-70. Melvyn Jones, 'Long-distance Migrants and Cultural Identity: The Example of a Welsh colony in South Yorkshire', *The Local Historian*, 26 (1996), 223-236. R. M. Jones, 'Welsh Immigrants in the Cities of North west England 1890-1930: some oral testimony', *Oral History,* 9 (1981), 33-41. Simon Jarrett, 'A Welshman coming to London and seeing a Jackanapes…': How Jokes and Slang Differentiated Eighteenth-century Londoners from the rest of Britain', *The London Journal*, 43, 2 (2018), 120-36.
[43] Belchem, 'Liverpool in 1848', p. 8. Also see Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish identity and the British press, 1798–1882* (Madison, 2004).
[44] 'Irish immigration into Liverpool', *Bolton Chronicle*, 19 May 1849, p. 3.
[45] Edward G. Lengal, *The Irish through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine era* (Westport: Praeger, 2002).
[46] For example, see the 'House Servants Wanted' column in *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 September 1858, p. 4. Of the 24 advertisements in the section, 7 excluded the Irish and 4 excluded the Welsh from applying.

commentators, a shame around the language.[47] It is surely far from impossible that this general context encouraged some migrants to reject an ethnic identity in order to emphasise their place and belonging to the host society.

However, for first-generation migrants, with strong accents and without mother-tongue English, this may not have been possible. For those with limited English skills, the effect of hostility towards the Irish may not have been pushing assimilation but emphasising the respectability of the Welsh. It is striking how even before the Irish famine public meetings of the Welsh of Liverpool were held to demonstrate Welsh loyalty to the royal family.[48] But it was religion that was key to emphasising Welsh respectability. Pooley's analysis of migrant settlement patterns in Liverpool found some clustering of Welsh migrants and he argued this was due to a desire to maintain their Welsh identity.[49] Welsh chapels are the clearest evidence of this desire and their vitality and numerical strength were buttressed by migration from Wales being a constant and long-term process. In the chapels the Welsh found opportunities for community, mutual support and to speak their language.[50] But Nonconformity also distanced the Welsh from Irish Catholics and allied them to the host Protestant society and its ideas of self-respectability. The importance of performing Welsh respectability is evident in the work of Mike Benbough-Jackson who demonstrated how the Liverpool Welsh used St David's day processions and church services to achieve this. The marches came to an end in the early 1850s and churches increasingly debated switching to English.[51] This was after the height of the concern around refugees from the Irish famine and it again suggests that a key purpose of the Welsh chapels emphasising respectability was to distance the Welsh from the Irish. This fits with the arguments of Mary Hickman who claims that the unrespectable Irish Catholic peasantry were an 'other' around which a respectable 'national-racial' British unit could be formed.[52]

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[47] See Martin Johnes, *Welsh Not: Education and the Anglicization of Nineteenth-century Wales* (forthcoming).
[48] For example, 'Welsh meeting to address the Queen', *Liverpool Mail*, 4 December 1841, p. 2.
[49] Pooley, 'The residential segregation of migrant communities', p. 377.
[50] R. Merfyn Jones and D. Ben Rees, *The Liverpool Welsh and their Religion* (Liverpool: Modern Welsh Publications, 1984).
[51] Benbough-Jackson, 'Welsh migrants and performance', pp. 72-3, 81-82.
[52] Mary J. Hickman, 'Alternative Historiographies of the Irish in Britain: A Critique of the Segregation/Assimilation Model', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Victorian Britain: The Local Dimension* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999), pp. 236-53. Also see Alexander Peach, review of *The Irish in Victorian Britain: the Local Dimension*, (review no. 128) https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/128 (accessed: 1 April 2020).

Thus, it maybe that emphasising Welshness was actually a way for migrants to signal their place in the host culture. It was a way of articulating, at a time of ethnic tension, that they were not an alien threat but good migrants that benefitted the host society. Therefore, 'Y Cymro', both by signing his letter as 'The Welshman' and by shouting in Welsh in the first place was perhaps performing or proclaiming his membership of a respectable group in the face of a beggar, who was unrespectable because of his colour, situation and known dishonesty.

There is a degree of speculation here but it is a different picture to some interpretations of the status of Welsh. Historians have sometimes suggested the Treachery of the Blue Books, as the 1847 education report became known in Wales, hurt the linguistic confidence of the Welsh elite creating a sense that the decline of Welsh was inevitable and a step forwards.[53] Yet there is also evidence of a popular pride in Welsh. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones argued that the language offered the working classes a sense of identity and dignity; it was something that was theirs, and, despite their desire to learn English, many clung to the language.[54] Charles Booth's 1902 study of London concluded that the Welsh living there 'love[d] their language' and that while 'English becomes the medium for business, Welsh remains the language of the emotions'.[55] Booth presumably meant that Welsh was the language of home and prayer for first-generation migrants but the Liverpool inn incident suggests that the emotional use of Welsh might extend beyond this. Here the language is perhaps being employed as an instrument of not just respectability but also of belonging and exclusion. This would be derived from how Welsh was firmly rooted in the city's culture. It was perhaps being used to signify who belonged and who did not in a world where Britishness meant whiteness. In the face of the Asian other, the Welsh migrant to Liverpool was sure he was part of the British motherland and he attempted to emphasise how the lascar was not at home by shouting at him in a language that he would not understand.

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[53] Geraint H. Jenkins, 'Introduction' in Geraint H. Jenkins (ed), *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Cardiff: UWP, 1998), 1-20, p. 12.
[54] Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, 'Language and Community in Nineteenth Century Wales' in David Smith (ed), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales, 1780-1980* (London: Pluto, 1980), 47-71.
[55] Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London. Third Series: Religious Influence 3* (London: Macmillan, 1902), pp, 63. 47.

Or perhaps 'Y Cymro' was just shouting in his mother tongue because he was angry, not thinking and this is what came naturally.[56] Entering the mentalities of the past and deciphering the symbolism behind words and actions is never easy; indeed, ultimately it is impossible in terms of removing any uncertainty. All the historian can do is search for meaning through contextualization and consideration and to admit that they might be wrong.

3 Race and lascar beggars

An 'Asian other' could be found in Liverpool because of the city's global maritime connections and its position as the leading exit point for the export of manufactured goods to India.[57] Like other major ports, mid-nineteenth-century Liverpool had a transient population of sailors of colour that fluctuated in number. Some settled permanently. There were also people of colour working as servants, soldiers, musicians, nannies, labourers, and trades and craftsmen.[58] The city may have been overwhelmingly white but the sight of someone of a different colour would not have been unusual in the city centre or docks area. Lascars, a contemporary term for South Asian seafarers, were prominent amongst the foreign sailors because of the volume of trade with India.[59] They were employed there for voyages to Britain but on landing could find themselves discharged, homeless and wageless. There were some legal responsibilities on the East India Company and shipowners for the lascars while in Britain but these could be evaded by the sailors not being declared on their arrival or denying where they came from.[60] When lascars were given accommodation by shipping companies, the conditions and food could be atrocious and their stay there might have to last months while they waited for work on a ship to take them home. Those that were abandoned often

[56] Torras and Gafaranga stress the importance of language preference and ability, as well as identity, in shaping which languages people chose to speak in multilingual contexts. Torras and Gafaranga. 'Social identities and language alteration'.
[57] Anthony Webster, 'Liverpool and the Asian trade, 1800–50: Some Insights into a Provincial British Commercial Network', in Sheryllynne Haggerty, Anthony Webster and Nicholas J. White (eds), *The Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 35-54. On trade with India more broadly see H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge, 2006).
[58] Chater, *Untold Histories*, ch. 9.
[59] For lascars in Britain see Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto, 1986), ch. 3; Michael H. Fisher, 'Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600–1857', *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006), 21–45; Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, c.1780-1830* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), ch. 6. For later in the century see G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (Delhi and New York, 2012).
[60] On their legal status see Michael Herbert Fisher, 'Excluding and Including "Natives of India": Early-Nineteenth-Century British-Indian Race Relations in Britain', *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, 2 (2007), 303-14.

ended up in 'low' lodging houses where, according to one 1872 retrospective report, they would be 'plundered of their wages and savings, stripped of their clothing, and, when all they possessed was gone' put onto the streets 'to beg, and in many cases to die'.[61] Some of those begging hung boards around their necks with their stories on. Others sang for money, swept streets, or sold matches.[62] Impoverished lascars might also sell religious tracts or hymn sheets. In his observations of the London poor in the 1840s, Mayhew noted that more than half the sellers of religious tracts in London were foreigners, such as 'Malays, Hindoos, and Negros', some of whom could not speak English.[63]

In Southampton in 1841, a lascar selling tracts was manhandled with such force by a policeman, who felt he was begging, that a complaint was made by a witness to the Mayor.[64] Such incidents illustrated the hostility lascars could face. All people of colour faced racism but Visram's study of Indians in Britain concluded that lascars in the early nineteenth century were looked down upon as indolent and immoral and were 'the most despised group of aliens in England'.[65] This hostility was rooted in an intersection of racism with religious and class prejudices. Christianity was equated with civilization and peoples of different religions were viewed as culturally inferior. Thus, across the British Empire, religious prejudice reinforced ideas of white superiority. Robinson-Dunn argued that lascars were considered outsiders because of their class position too. She argued that they could be seen as 'part of the urban, migratory, labour poor who had not embraced Christianity. For contemporary reformers these people were an "alien nation" living in the heart of the city in areas that were "unexplored", "uncivilised" and even "colonial"'.[66] Part of such attitudes must have been rooted in the general antagonism towards begging that grew in the wake of post-famine Irish migration. As with the Irish, there was suspicion that the lascars' plight was not real and that their numbers were growing. In 1850 a summoning officer of a London court even maintained that lascar beggars preferred 'a life of mendicancy to returning to India'.[67]

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[61] 'Home for Asiatics', *London Evening Standard*, 29 May 1872, p. 6.
[62] See the description in Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 4, pp. 423-4.
[63] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1 (London: Griffin, Bohn and Co, 1861), p. 242
[64] 'The philanthropist', *Hampshire Advertiser*, 11 December 1841, p. 2. The complaint was dismissed.
[65] Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*, pp. 46-47.
[66] Diane Robinson-Dunn, *The Harem, Slavery and British Imperial Culture: Anglo-Muslim Relations in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 157.
[67] 'Desertion of Lascars in the Port of London', *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, 3 May 1850, p. 4.

Figure 1: 'Hindoo Tract-Seller'. From Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor, vol. 1* (London: Griffin, Bohn and Co, 1861), p. 241.

Osterhammel has argued that the whole concept of civilization was dependent on measuring itself against the existence of a 'savage' or uncivilized other.[68] Indeed, measuring and comparing people and behaviours at home with those in the Empire was central to the very creation of race and the way it naturalised a belief that differences in skin colour indicated much deeper and more profound biological, cultural and character differences. This

[68] Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 826.

measuring was not just an abstract or intellectual process but one that also drew on actual encounters between people of different skin colours. This may have happened most often at sites in the wider Empire itself but mobility was not one way and imperial subjects from elsewhere came to and were encountered at home in Britain.[69] The resulting mundane everyday interactions between people of different colours do not often appear in the historical record but they were important in the process of racialization and reaffirming the sense that people of colour were different. The Liverpool incident – the event itself, the publication and republication of the story, and the reading of it in the newspapers – was one such example and it was rooted in and reaffirmed racial attitudes. It might not use explicit racist language but within the story is evidence of how people of colour were probably treated and thought about on a daily basis. Y Cymro's behaviour and framing of the story certainly drew upon racial ideas. The synonymity of race and religion and the sense of physical difference integral to racism are clear in the assumption at the letter's end that 'Hindoos' had fixed physical characteristics but that this man's hair 'was too wiry for a Hindoo'. There is a clear sense of assumed superiority in how the man is shouted at and dismissed from a public space. Before he knows the man is not South Asian, 'Y Cymro' also assumes a position of superiority by taking the lascar's hand. Although they lacked any discernible racial feature beyond colour, hands were coming to be thought of as signifiers of the self and even the future, something which, unlike the face, could not deceive. Demanding to hold someone else's hand and then examining it was not something that would be done to an equal. The encounter might even be thought of as an early example of the process of inscribing hands with racial characteristics that Briefel has argued became common in the heightened racial awareness and tensions of the late Victorian period.[70] It is notable that 'Y Cymro' says that 'even' the hands would pass for an Oriental in the Carnatic, as if they were the most natural signifiers of racial identity. Moreover, the details of Y Cymro shouting at and taking the hands of the man are excluded from shorter retellings of the story. Such actions were perhaps too commonplace and unnoteworthy and instead the other newspapers focus on the deception of the 'pretended Hindoo' to better 'obtains alms' thus casting aspersions on all lascars forced to beg. This narrative fitted pre-existing assumptions about both people of colour and beggars but it also

[69] For a seminal exploration of the construction and impact of difference see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[70] Aviva Briefel, *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

probably helped reinforce and spread the very idea of white middle-class moral superiority. The ‘otherness of colonized persons’, like the wider poor, ‘was neither inherent nor stable’ and thus difference had to be ‘defined and maintained’.[71] Telling the story of encounters such as this one was part of that process of racialization.

Yet ‘Y Cymro’ also felt unable to simply tell the man to sit with him and he had to buy his attention with a drink. This implies a more complex relationship between privilege and the unprivileged than might be first apparent. So, too, does how common begging was. While it was, of course, the result of the marginalization of the poor, it is also evidence of some sympathy and generosity towards those in dire positions. After all, there would be little point begging if no one ever gave money. Roberts has argued that for the middle classes ‘discharging their culturally assumed responsibility of caring for cases of “genuine misfortunate”’ was central to their self-respect.[72] The historical evidence might not focus on those who donated but such people and their motives can be detected amidst the contemporary condemnations of beggars. In 1857 a magistrate presiding over a case where two Chinese men were charged with assaulting and wounding a woman who kept a brothel ‘for the convenience and accommodation of Chinese and Lascar mendicants’, complained of ‘the mistaken benevolence of people who gave money to filthy and idle Chinese and Lascar mendicants’.[73] Andrew Halliday writing in Mayhew’s study of London claimed that ‘snake-eyed’ ‘Hindoo Beggars’, very often affected to be converts to Christianity, giving away religious tracts ‘with the intention of entrapping the sympathy of elderly ladies’. He maintained that their begging rested on ‘an unbroken stream of falsehood’, whether that was about their religion, their desire to return home or even how cold they were.[74] Another report claimed lascar beggars could earn three to five shillings a day from the ‘charity of the thoughtless public’ which was tapped ‘by the sight of these poor dumb strangers’.[75] Victorian society was thus not without conscience or pity for the poor and unfortunate, especially seemingly if they were cold or far from home. Articles in newspapers condemning

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Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda’, in University of California Press, 1996)

[72] Roberts, ‘Reshaping the gift relationship’, p. 231.

[73] ‘A sink of iniquity in Bluegate-Fields, Shadwell’, *Sun*, 4 July 1857, p. 3.

[74] Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor,* vol. 4, pp. 423-4.

[75] ‘Home for Asiatics’, *London Evening Standard*, 29 May 1872, p. 6. In 1815, a parliamentary enquiry was told that ‘a negro beggar’ had obtained through begging a fortune of some £1500 and retired to the West Indies with it. *Report from Committee on the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis* (1815), p. 50.

employers' treatment of lascars were also not unknown, and press coverage of both coroner investigations of their deaths aboard ships and court cases against sailors and captains also gave publicity to claims of ill treatment.[76] In 1850, for example, the ship New Liverpool docked at Southampton and was put into quarantine following reports of illness. When it was inspected 'one of the most horrific sights presented itself. In a dark, filthy, ill-ventilated hole, one Lascar lay dead, and six more lay, apparently dying, beside him of the scurvy.' Their food was found to be rice swarming with maggots and fish that was black, hard and dry. Some of those who inspected the ship were taken ill afterwards.[77] In response to both the genuine sympathy and the concerns that the plight of penniless foreign sailors might be fuelling crime, a home for Asiatic, African and South Sea sailors was set up by missionary societies in London in 1857.

Such charitable giving was inescapably linked to religion. Disdain for other religions may have been fundamental to prejudicial attitudes to other races but Christianity also preached benevolence for those less fortunate. Thus mixed in with the racism, exploitation and violence of Empire was also a belief in a Christian duty to help and civilize others. This was evident in William Mulready's 1840s painting 'Train up a Child', which depicts two women encouraging a reluctant child to give money to a group of sinister looking Asian beggars. Lorimer has argued that, in the early nineteenth century, people of colour were widely held to be inferior but this was not always attributed to inherent or biological characteristics and that there was a belief they could be 'redeemed' with the right guidance and help.[78] Converting them to Christianity was central to that idea of redemption. This explains evidence of some South Asian men who did convert being treated kindly and generously, even if this might be reported in terms that suggested the generosity was misplaced. One 1853 tale of such a man in Devon claimed that he had boasted that the certificate of baptism he was given 'would completely set him up in life'.[79]

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[76] James Frey, 'Lascars, the Thames Police Court and the Old Bailey: crime on the high seas and the London courts, 1852–8', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 16 (2014), 196-211. Similarly, impoverished Indian ayahs could be the subject of some sympathy and help in Britain. See Arunima Datta, 'Responses to Travelling Indian Ayahs in Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Britain', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21 (2021), 94-104.

[77] 'Horrible treatment of a ship's crew', *Kentish Independent*, 19 October 1850, p. 6.

[78] Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978).

[79] 'A dark job', *Western Times*, 23 April 1853, p. 5.

Thus white interactions with people of colour were not just rooted in contempt and hostility. Racial prejudices themselves could lead to charity since these were also connected to paternal and hierarchical ideas where those at the imagined racial pinnacle believed they had a duty to help those further down. There was also a fascination with the exoticism of different cultures. For example, thanks to the influence of wives returning from India, fabrics, shawls, jewellery and cooking from the subcontinent became quite fashionable in Britain.[80] It is notable that some reports of lascar beggars often emphasised their dress. An 1862 description noted they dressed in cottons or 'chintz of a pattern commonly used for bed-furniture'. [81] The appeal of this visual strangeness meant that a 'Hindoo Tract-Seller' was one the subjects chosen for illustration in Mayhew's account of the London poor (figure 1), while lascars begging or selling in similar dress were also the subject of contemporary paintings.[82] A fascination with the exotic, like giving money to beggars of a different race, does not, of course, mean the non-existence of racism or prejudice but they do highlight the need for nuance in understanding how different peoples co-existed and interacted with each other. Even 'Y Cymro' claimed that he admired 'a clever man whatever colour he may assume'. That comment was deeply patronising but Britain was not a universally prejudiced society. As Laura Tabili's research into census returns has demonstrated, racial inclusion and integration were common in the port communities of South Shields, with migrants marrying and living and working with natives. She thus cautions against studying race only through the prism of conflict because it has 'allowed the most xenophobic and racist of historical actors to stand for all Britons'.[83] Similarly, donating money to lascar beggars cannot simply be explained away by racist paternalism or a fascination with exoticism. At least some white Britons treated people of colour as fellow human beings.

It was this sympathy for impoverished lascars which may explain why the Beaumaris man found pretending to be one profitable. It could even be that the 'Welsh Hindoo' had poor English and found this had less negative impact on his interactions with Liverpudlians if they thought he was not from the British Isles. Perhaps the local expectation was that

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[80] See Napur Chaudhuri, 'Shawls, Jewellery, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain', in Napur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 231-46.

[81] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London poor,* vol. 4 (London, 1862), pp. 423-4.

[82] See unknown, 'Lascar', reproduced at https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/lascar-c19th-century-news-photo/463960955. Godfrey Sykes (1824-66), 'Lascar', online at https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/lascar-71267.

[83] Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture*, p. 7.

foreigners could not be expected to speak English but that those from other parts of the British Isles were.

The apparent fact that someone apparently found it profitable to pretend to be a lascar sheds a rather different light on the real lascars. Their use of false stories about religious conversion or how they came to be on the streets were not simply the consequence of desperation. Lascar beggars were taking control of their own fortunes and negotiating the prejudices of the period by seeking to turn them to their advantage. Their race was not hidden away but performed, not least through their clothing and their taking to roles that centred on public spaces, where, as one contemporary observer noted, 'their picturesque appearance, of which they are proud and conscious, can be effectively displayed'.[84] It was something that stood them apart from other beggars.

There are parallels here with disabled beggars who, as David Turner has argued, used the discourse of pity as a resource to 'remind the powerful of their social responsibilities'. Thus rather than hide away their disability, they might display and employ it in order to attract financial support.[85] This is also in line with historiography that emphasises how people of colour in Britain were not just passive victims of racism but active in trying to fight for better positions for themselves. Within economic and cultural systems centred on prejudice, people of colour resisted and negotiated colonial stereotyping and sought to take advantage of global networks and economic opportunities. Lascars were no different. Shompa Lahiri has demonstrated how Indian seafarers were able to use the stereotype of them as docile to resist attempts to convert them to Christianity, pursue their own interests and mask their resistance.[86] Aaron Jaffer has explored how lascars protested and resisted their treatment and conditions onboard ships through songs, unrest and even violent mutiny, while James Frey has shown how they were willing to challenge in the courts the conditions they had to endure.[87] Considering

[84] Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 4, pp.423-4. On the importance of performance in race see Shompa Lahiri, *Indian Mobilities in the West, 1900-1947. Gender, Performance, Embodiment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Similarly, there is evidence from the 1850s of one lascar tract seller who did speak English but pretended to be deaf and dumb and used this as a ruse not to pass on the texts once he had taken someone's money. T. R. Underwood, 'Work among lascars in London', *The East and the West: A Quarterly Review for the Study of Missions*, 4 (1906), 451-68, p. 457.
[85] David Turner, 'Disability History and the History of Emotions: Reflections on Eighteenth-century Britain', *Asclepio*, 68, 2 (2016), 1-13.
[86] Shompa Lahiri, 'Patterns of Resistance: Indian Seamen in Imperial Britain', in Anne J. Kershen (ed.), *Language, Labour and Migration* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 155–178
[87] Aaron Jaffar, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer, 2015). Aaron Jaffar, '"Lord of the Forecastle": Serangs, Tindals,

how people challenged and negotiated racisms does not negate the existence of racism. Indeed, despite the resistance of Indian seafarers, from the late nineteenth century, there was an intensification of racialized politics around employment issues as the numbers of seafarers of colour grew.[88] Throughout the century, the poverty and marginalisation of lascar beggars and other people of colour was always exacerbated by race. The condemnation of the deception that was alleged in the begging of lascars was linked to race too. That does not change the fact that racism was neither universal nor something that simply condemned those who endured it to the position of passive victims. But this should never detract from the racism that had to be resisted in the first place.

4 Conclusion: truths and mirrors

As is so often the case with the raw materials for histories of people of colour, the voice and perspective of the 'Welsh Hindoo' was lost in the original telling of the story. 'Y Cymro' may have asked questions of him but he choose to tell newspaper readers nothing of the man's circumstances, his life and how he came to be in Liverpool. The nameless 'Welsh Hindoo' is nonetheless portrayed as a clever deceiver and we might now view him as someone showing initiative and agency to earn a living. The lascar who prosecuted for drunkenness, who may or may not have been the same person, remains even more anonymous and even his conviction did not get his name in the newspaper. Indeed, in a further example of how people of colour might be dehumanized by white society, he was the only one of 26 defendants reported in that's day account of the Police Court whose name was not published.[89] As Arunima Datta has argued, in the historical record of subaltern imperial subjects, 'the silences often speak loudest'.[90] 'Y Cymro' is also anonymous but that was his choice. He was content to let his cleverness at discovering the 'deception' stand for itself. Also lost is the reactions of readers. We can assume this was seen as a story of some interest by its reprinting but whether readers were amused or angered is lost to posterity.

Whatever the absences, in this one incident we can see how embedded structures of power and inequality were in early Victorian society and how groups defined themselves

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and Lascar Mutiny, c.1780–1860', *International Review of Social History*, 58 (2013), 153-75. Frey, 'Lascars, the Thames Police Court and the Old Bailey'.

[88] Jonathan Hyslop, 'Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c.1880–1945', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 44, 1 (2009), 49-67.

[89] 'Police Court', *Liverpool Mercury*,15 May 1849, p. 4. Nor is there any surviving legal record of his prosecution.

[90] Datta, 'Responses to Travelling Indian Ayahs', p. 96.

against each other in a complex web of intersecting identities. South Asian sailors were marginalized by both their race and their class. This condemned some of them to begging but this could be a profitable means of earning of living, especially when embellished with tales that would stir respectable sympathies. The Welsh, in contrast, were not generally marginalized but perhaps feared being so and thus emphasised their ethnic identity in order to distance themselves from the Irish and those who were not white. Their religion allowed a public performance of their respectability but language too was part of their identity and emotional life. Speaking Welsh was a symbol of identity, but it was also as natural for them as it was for lascar sailors to retain their own dress, diet and tongue. Not everything was intended as performance, even if that could be the outcome.

This incident is also a vivid illustration of how the global movements of a mobile working class meant ports were places of interaction for different peoples. This produced local cultures that were fluid and diverse, where people had to learn how to interact and live with each other. Ports were also multilingual places. Communities where multiple languages co-existed and interacted were common across the globe.[91] British historians too often forget how this was also true of parts of their own island but an interaction in a Liverpool inn can serve to remind them that linguistic diversity is nothing new.

Yet, whatever historical insights a dissection of the incident might offer, there is no way of knowing exactly what had actually happened. There can be no certainty that the 'Welsh Hindoo' was the same man prosecuted a few days before for drunkenness. Given the claims that half of religious tracts sellers in London were foreigners, it is far from impossible that there was more than one lascar selling religious tracts in Liverpool in 1849.[92] It also seems unlikely that a court would fail to realise that the man arrested was not actually a lascar. Yet this has to be a possibility if 'Y Cymro' was right that the 'Welsh Hindoo's' appearance was very convincing. Or perhaps the deception was detected by the court but not known or highlighted by the reporter.

Nor can there be any certainty that the incident in the inn happened at all. There were cases of people trying to make money from selling fabricated stories to mid-century

[91] For the case that the multilingual nature of societies needs to be recognised as commonplace rather than exceptional see Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[92] Mayhew, *Labour Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1, p. 242**.**

newspapers and it is not impossible that 'Y Cymro' made the whole thing up.[93] The press, though, did take readers' letters seriously. Publishing them helped cement newspapers' claim that they were organs of public opinion and letters were a means to add accuracy and depth to reports of current affairs and public life.[94] This suggests that the *Liverpool Mercury* believed the incident to be true. Nonetheless, the letter is written with an eye for storytelling, leaving the key reveal of the deception until late. It could be thought of as part of the mid-century taste for melodrama, where people told sensational and emotional tales full of conspiracies and grand gestures, often so they 'could describe themselves'.[95] Sending such a tale to a newspaper allowed what might otherwise be an anecdote for friends to reach wider audiences, giving the teller a small moment of fame for their cleverness in unmasking the deception. Yet 'Y Cymro' signed his letter anonymously. If it was a literary ruse or attempt to show off by the writer, it was one he chose not to publicly claim ownership of.

In many ways whether the incident happened or not is not the point. As historians who have studied deceptions have argued, their historical significance lies not in uncovering the truth but in understanding the resonances of the stories, 'the work they might have done' and how they act as mirrors 'in which we might see reflected the worlds' in which they were made and told.[96] The story of this curious incident in a Liverpool inn certainly seems to mirror something of class, ethnicity and race in the 1840s but reading a historical reflection is never easy. Deciphering or decoding the behaviour and mentalities of the past always requires a degree of supposition and one can never be sure for certain how accurate any historical interpretation is. All historians know this but not many discuss it when actually writing about the past itself, even though they always note it when discussing the theory of history writing. Perhaps that too is a deception. If nothing else, curious and odd incidents that are difficult to understand should be a reminder that all historical interpretations rest upon uncertain foundations.

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[93] Stephen Tate, 'Getting rich on invented news', *British Journalism Review*, 28, 2 (2017), 53-57.
[94] Stefanie Markovits, 'Rushing into Print: 'Participatory Journalism' during the Crimean War', *Victorian Studies*, 50, 4 (2008), 559-86.
[95] See Rohan McWilliam, 'Melodrama and the Historians', *Radical History*, 78 (2000), 57-84, quote from p 79.
[96] Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), introduction.