



LONG-SONG SELLER

"Three yards a penny!
 Three yards a penny!
 Beautiful songs!
 Newest songs!
 Popular songs!
 Three yards a penny!
 Songs, songs, songs!"

And so begins the title section of a great collection of writings available for free download on the Project Gutenberg site. In London in the 1800s, the streets must have been teeming with street-sellers and buskers of one kind or another. This book contains hundreds of selected examples of verse and prose written to be

sold as print, or sung, or read aloud, as a sort of precursor to the titillating pop craziness of info presentation on the internet. The title pages continue:

**CURIOSITIES
 OF
 STREET LITERATURE:**

Comprising
 "COCKS," or "CATCHPENNIES"

A Large and Curious Assortment of
 STREET-DROLLERIES, SQUIBS,
 HISTORIES, COMIC TALES IN
 PROSE AND VERSE

Broadsides on the Royal Family,
 Political Litanies, Dialogues,
 Catechisms, Acts of Parliament, Street
 Political Papers

And so forth. According to the introduction, this business was pretty intense and frantic, with a few prominent publishers of "...productions written expressly for the amusement of the lower orders by street-authors." Apparently these "street-authors" would scramble to write a prose piece or a song or verse and would often rush of to sell their work to the publishers, who also had a staff of in-house writers cranking out much the same. Street venders would buy these productions and sell them as "penny broadsides." There were also poets who sang their own verses and, I assume, sold copies of the lyrics to make ends meet. Singer-songwriters, in today's lingo.

The introduction of this 1871 book includes a long quote from an 1861 article on the subject, which contains a touching take on the almost always anonymous works, giving a nod to the nameless (and dirt poor) street authors responsible for them:

...we must be thankful...to be able to embalm and hand down to posterity a name here and there... In answer to our inquiries in this matter, generally we have been told, 'Oh, anybody writes them' and with that answer we have had to rest satisfied. But...we walk about the streets...peering into the faces...and saying to ourselves, "That man may be a writer of ballads."

Another interesting note in the same article refers to the confines put upon

the authors by the same sort of considerations of marketing alive today:

It must be borne in mind that the street-author is closely restricted in the quality of his effusions. It must be such that the patterers approve, as the chanters can chant, the ballad singers sing, and--above all, such as the street buyers will buy.

Some of the titles: *Shocking Rape and Murder of Two Lovers. Dreadful Catastrophe. Railroad to Hell. Teasing Made Easy for the Ladies. Sailor Jack and the Queen. The Windham Lunacy Case.*

There is a whole section on what they call "Gallows" Literature of the Streets: *Execution of Five Unfortunate Sailors.*

Often there is a prose piece of wild news, followed by a long verse describing the same incident.

My favorite pieces are the comic and nonsense bits, which often remind me of Beatles lyrics for some reason. Here's part of something called:

**BATTLE OF PEA SOUP
 Fought on the FIFTY-TWELFTH DAY
 OF ROTTONSTICKS**

This memorable battle took place on the Ocean of Sprats, situated on the Continent of Green Peas, within half a mile of a Donkey; where Bobby the Ratcatcher swallowed the Monument, and the poor old soldier was killed by being drowned in a bog of buttermilk: such an unseasonable battle was never known before...

Arthur Mc Kelly's nose was knocked into eighteen thousand pieces and converted into a cheese knife, and sold in Plum Pudding Court, going up to Christmas on the top side of little Bobby the Ratcatcher...

I highly recommend downloading this peculiar book, which is free and available in Kindle, ePub, and text versions, and is also readable online. Go to gutenberg.org and search for "Curiosities of Street Literature," or head directly to:

www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/49128

What fun!