# Victorian Municipal Waste Management

FRANCES THIELMAN
Texas A&M University, United States

MUNICIPAL solid waste management shapes public life at every moment, and it did so for the Victorians as much as it does for us today. Today we think of trash as something that could harm us, something that will one day choke a sea turtle or leach into our groundwater. However, though Victorians were concerned about the sanitary risk unruly trash posed, profit, not conservation or fear of hazardous waste, was the primary motivator behind all Victorian municipal waste management.[1] In *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), journalist Henry Mayhew compares trash gatherers to agricultural laborers, highlighting how Victorians viewed trash as a natural resource, and how those who produced or acquired it could make use of this harvest to the best of their ability.[2] Though the Victorian period is often characterized as a time when government and public works were becoming centralized, this was not the case with municipal solid waste management. Instead, a focus on the individual's pursuit of profit meant that Victorian waste management was dispersed across society, with homemakers, recycling entrepreneurs, dustmen, and the very poorest members of society all playing a role.

A note on terminology: I use the American terms "trash" and "garbage" interchangeably with the British "rubbish." However, when referring to Victorian professionals in charge of removing discarded waste, I will use such era- and region-appropriate terms as "dustmen," "scavenger," and "rag-picker," since there are important differences between these roles.

Many different actors, including local government, private businesses, and domestic households, contributed to managing Victorian trash and trying to make it into a source of income. Waste management was overseen to some degree by boards of health, who attended to

**Frances Thielman** holds a PhD from Texas A&M University and is currently a lecturer there as well. Her primary field of expertise is Victorian literature with subspecialties in medical humanities, ecocriticism, the history of sanitation and infrastructure, open education resources, and curricular design. She wrote a chapter on the novel and co-authored one on the novella for her university's open-access introductory literature textbook *Surface and Subtext: Literature, Research, and Writing*. Her work has also appeared in the *Victorians Institute Journal*.

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so-called "nuisances" and required householders to keep their properties tidy. Meanwhile, dustmen, scavengers, and independent recycling businesses gathered and made use of the trash as best they could.

On the domestic side of waste management, women worked to salvage trash and use it to save the household money. It was the middle class housewife's responsibility to determine when an item or substance in her home was worn out and should be thrown away, and when it could be used for something else. Indeed, in writings about public sanitation, the housewife was often used as a metaphor for waste management. Journalist Lyon Playfair writes of industrial waste processing, "Chemistry, like a prudent housewife, economises every scrap,"[3] and Mayhew, of London's dustmen, writes: "London, as if in the care of a tidy housewife, is *always* being cleaned."[4] Women were portrayed as thrifty trash savers in literature as well. This is a particularly prominent theme in the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell. Once they had ascertained that they couldn't make use of it themselves, women removed the trash from the home, and dustmen or scavengers would come to collect it.

After trash left the home, it was usually gathered up by someone who made their living from disposing of or repurposing it. One of the more successful municipal waste management enterprises was the dust-yard and its attendants, most famously portrayed in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). In journalism from the time, dust-yards were depicted as places of productivity, technological ingenuity, and hard work paying off. Describing the natural habitat of the London dustman, Henry Mayhew writes of the dust-yard that "the whole yard seems alive" with activity as the women dust sifters bustle back and forth, processing London's ashes and kitchen garbage.[5] Similarly, R. H. Horne's educational short story in *Household Words* entitled "Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed" (1850), which is widely regarded as an inspiration for *Our Mutual Friend*,[6] informs readers of what exactly goes on in the dust-yards; Horne describes the dust mounds as productive workplaces, staffed with specialized women dust sifters and divided into "different departments," including soft-ware ("all vegetable and animal matters [*sic*]—everything that will decompose") and hard-ware ("broken pottery, pans, crockery, earthenware, oyster-shells, &c.").[7] Horne also writes in complimentary terms about the people who work in the dust-yard, emphasizing their productivity and industriousness.[8]

Victorian waste reformers write with enthusiasm about the many different valuable things that could be made out of repurposed refuse, if only it were used correctly. Waste products were used to make virtually

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every type of women's finery. In *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances* (1862),[9] an enormous catalog of the many uses of trash, journalist Peter Lund Simmonds describes how coagulated blood was used to dye calico, dead dogs were boiled down and the resultant mixture used in the preparation of kid gloves, fish scales were used to make mock pearls, horse hooves were used for fancy snuff boxes, cow dung for calico-printing, and mineral waste to produce mauve dye.[10] In describing how waste products were processed and sold to women, male writers often expressed amusement. Simmonds writes, "Even the fine lady of the present day, who piques herself on her exquisitely fitting gloves, would give one of those little shrieks, which she thinks so sweetly feminine, if told that the thumb of her glove was made of ratskin, as more elastic yet tougher than kid" (123). This repeated trope, where a clueless woman wears a beautiful object made from trash, sang the praises of recycled commodities while also critiquing the supposed vanity of the women who wished to purchase such items.

Trash could be used for personal profit, but Victorians hoped it could be used to promote the wealth of the British Empire as well. One of the most important ambitions shared by Victorian sanitation reformers was to manufacture valuable goods from trash as a means of liberating Britain from dependence upon foreign imports. Simmonds refers to the problem of rag-collecting over and over again throughout his book, devoting a whole chapter to the shoddy industry and featuring a chart of all the rags that England had to import (Simmonds feels unnecessarily) from other countries to make into paper and textiles (9).[11] "There are more rags wasted, burnt, or left to rot," he writes, "than would make our paper manufacturers independent from all assistance from abroad" (136). Similarly, in the 1876 edition of *Waste Products*, Simmonds also describes recommendations for how agricultural waste in Jamaica and other colonies should be recycled into paper. He also takes note, without any apparent consciousness of its grotesqueness, of a practice of making use of human remains from ancient burial sites in Egypt for British agriculture (91). White British colonizers viewed the human beings they colonized as goods from whom value could be extracted to promote the supremacy of Victoria's empire, and their incorporation of Egyptian bodies into actual waste management systems is a testament to this fact.

Though Victorians had such an optimistic view of trash's usefulness, their belief in its lucrative potential actually prevented a centralized waste management infrastructure from forming. Because citizens believed that trash pickup could be made to pay for itself, they were unwilling to pay

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for it. Why should they *pay* a dustman to come, when that dustman could make a living on the very scraps he gathered from their houses? This was not necessarily an unreasonable perspective, particularly because, initially, dustmen *were* able to make a living from household refuse alone.[12] Though waste reformers waxed eloquent about making pearls from fish scales, etc., the only types of household waste that were truly profitable were ashes from coal fires and rags. Ash could be turned to brick and rags could be turned to paper, and there was a large demand for both. But as urban populations grew, waste management became less and less profitable as the amounts of waste urban dwellers produced grew out of sync with the uses that could be made of that waste. The huge number of coal-burning chimneys produced far more ash than there was demand for, and a newly literate public demanded far more paper than could be supplied by means of recycling rags. The heterogeneity of the materials handled by municipal waste management also proved to be a barrier to centralizing it. Paper mills and ash incinerators were completely different technologies operated by people with different skills, and therefore, the two most lucrative types of recycling could not easily be performed on the same facilities.[13]

The Victorian desire to profit from trash caused social and sanitary problems as well. Though citizens did not want to pay for rubbish collection, rubbish was being created in massive quantities, particularly in poor neighborhoods that could not afford to pay dustmen, resulting in heaps of filth that shocked sanitation reformers.[14] A whole class of scavengers subsisted upon this rubbish. Though authors like Horne, Mayhew, and Dickens report admiringly on the industriousness of dustmen, their focus when discussing scavengers is on their destitution. In his seminal *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1843), sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick quotes an eyewitness who reports that "the bone-pickers" are "often hardly human in appearance."[15] Their presence was a testament to the failures of privatized municipal solid waste management, which left trash to build up where no one could pay for its removal. Their poverty was also proof that trash was not as easy to repurpose and sell as many wished to believe.

It wasn't until middle-class householders were basically being held hostage by their trash that parishes, rather than individuals, began to make a regular practice of employing dustmen to pick up household rubbish without asking them to accept the trash itself as wages. Dust-contractors brought this about in part through extortion. If a dustman came to a house and asked for a tip and the residents declined,

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dustmen were known to "accidentally" spill filthy soot and kitchen trash inside the house, or they might blackball that resident so that their dustbin would not be emptied again until they agreed to pay.[16] Furthermore, London's slums—known amongst dustmen as "dead pieces"—could be neglected by dustmen for months at a time since residents couldn't afford tips. When trash lost its value, trash pickup itself became the commodity, and modern public works began to take shape.

Though Victorian municipal waste management was a dispersed and disorganized system of infrastructure, it still tells us a great deal about what Victorians thought about the world and how they lived. Their commitment to capitalism and profit, which sometimes inhibited their ability to handle the actual sanitation problems trash caused, can be seen in the poor scavengers and well-off dustmen who did their best to make use of Victorian householders' trash. Their elevated view of the domestic housewife and their contempt for the lady of fashion can be seen in the uses women made of trash. Waste management practices also provide a microcosm of nineteenth-century British nationalism, complete with joint desires to promote Britain's self-sufficiency and to subjugate nations populated by people of color. My research on trash has shown me that our trash is a portrait of our lives. It shows us what we value and what we don't. The structures Victorians built to attend to their trash can help us understand how they ordered society as well.

## NOTES

[1] For more on the commercial aspect of waste management throughout Britain's history, see Stokes, *The Business of Waste* (2013).

[2] Mayhew, *London Labour*, 187.

[3] Qtd. in Simmonds, *Waste Products* (1876), 3.

[4] Mayhew, *London Labour*, 159.

[5] Mayhew, *London Labour*, 171

[6] See Frank Gibbon for a more in-depth analysis of the connections between *Our Mutual Friend* and "Dust."

[7] Horne, "Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed," 380.

[8] Horne, "Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed," 380.

[9] *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances* was first published in 1862. In 1876 Simmonds released what is called the third edition, but it is really a completely different work and not merely an update or a correction of the first and second edition. The 1876 edition takes note of

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the way the landscape has changed in waste management since his first edition was released, provides information on new types of waste and how to use them, adds an extended preface, and is organized differently.

[10] Simmonds, *Waste Products* (1876), 361, 362, 395, 364. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

[11] Shoddy is fabric made of processed, worn-out rags.

[12] For a more comprehensive study of dustmen, see Maidment, *Dusty Bob*.

[13] See "A Paper Mill" and Simmonds's description of "The Queen's Tobacco Pipe."

[14] See William Godwin's *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, in which the author describes a mountain of trash. See also Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 10.

[15] Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition*, 165.

[16] Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 9–11.

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