Voices from the Margins: Dickens, Wells and Bennett

To pay his way, to lie in bed an hour later on Sundays; an outing on Bank holidays, a fine fortnight in the summer – he asks no more. And because he asks for so little he generally fails to get it. The clerk’s summer fortnight in the country is notoriously wet.

Alice Dudeney, The Wise Woods (1905)

It is a pathetic thing, this suburban life, when viewed through non-suburban eyes. Yet there is much happiness in the suburbs; and that is perhaps the most pathetic thing of all.


Perhaps the most famous lower-middle-class figure of the late Victorian period is Mr Pooter, who first appeared in Punch in the 1890s in a series of illustrated comic sketches by George and Weedon Grossmith. The sketches subsequently appeared in book form with the telling title of The Diary of a Nobody (1892). The Grosssmiths’ portrayal of an earnest and loyal but intellectually and socially limited clerk is very much in the tradition of Dickens’s affectionate parodies of lower-middle-class figures. Mr Pooter is mocked by the junior clerks in his office, scorned by tradesmen and cab-drivers, and undermined by his charwoman, who uses pages from his diary, in which he professes to have invested ‘much pride’ and ‘a great deal of pains’, to light the fire.¹ Pooter’s exaggerated sense of his own dignity and his oversensitivity to the indifference he never fails to inspire in others betray the kind of lower-middle-class pretentiousness deplored by bourgeois observers. But Pooter’s petty pretensions are born of naivety rather than of pomposity or social ambition. By the end of The Diary of a Nobody, Pooter has indeed reached what seems to be the pinnacle

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of his ambitions with his promotion to senior clerk, which he celebrates in typically Pooterish fashion with a bottle of grocers’ champagne. He is completely satisfied with his modest life and endearingly blind to its limitations.

What makes Mr Pooter remarkable is the survival – even the expansion – of his popularity after the initial publication of the book. *The Diary of a Nobody* has been reprinted numerous times throughout the hundred years since its first appearance, and each new edition includes an introduction that lovingly details both Pooter’s absurdity and his merit. The successful conjunction of these two qualities is indeed the basis of Pooter’s special charm and, in the assessment of one of the introductions, of his creators’ special genius. ‘[I]t is a particular triumph of the authors’, John Squire attests, ‘that, although they make him so superbly silly, they leave us with an admiration of his “sterling worth”.’ This apparently sincere but nevertheless rather condescending affection for Pooter and the values he represents is coupled in the introductions with the extraordinary conviction that *The Diary of a Nobody*, while comic, is realism at its best. Squire claims that ‘while we are laughing at the Pouters and their friends we are also fascinated by the verisimilitude, the stark, unannotated realism of the events of the dialogue’; the *Diary of a Nobody*, he maintains, is a ‘transcript from life’ that is ‘destined to a perennial popularity amongst the discriminating.’ (p. 18)

A generation later, another introduction makes even more extravagant claims for the realism of *The Diary of a Nobody*:

Many besides Hilaire Belloc have valued it as ‘one of the half-dozen immortal achievements of our time’. It is ‘a slice of life’, a social document, and no conscientiously realistic novel, however grim, has come nearer to presenting with absolute, literal truth the life which it sets out to portray. In particular the Nobody himself, the honest, obtuse, child-like Mr Pooter, who is Platitude personified, appears in his habit as he lived, completely self-revealed by his own unsparing chronicle of trivialities.

Such claims are patently ridiculous, although it can be argued that much of the humor of *The Diary of a Nobody* is effected through touches of realism – through apparently inconsequential but carefully observed detail, such as Pooter’s mentioning in his description of his ‘nice little back garden’ that it ‘runs down to the railway.’