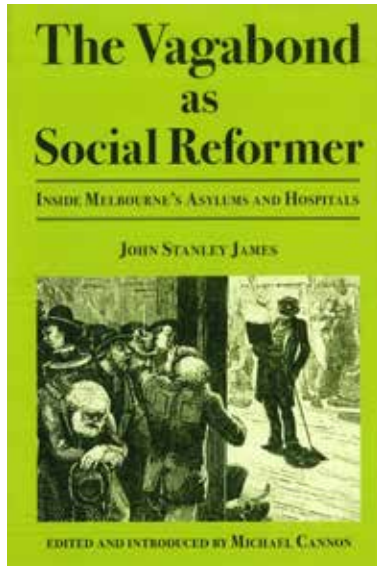


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The Vagabond as Social Reformer: Inside Melbourne's Asylums and Hospitals

By John Stanley James, edited and introduced by Michael Cannon

2020

Michael Cannon

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John Stanley James, known by many other pseudonyms such as Julian Thomas, is a legend in Victoria's history of institutions and investigative journalism. Disguised as a patient, a low-level employee or even a prisoner, he infiltrated Melbourne's institutions and closely observed their daily operations. Writing under the pseudonym 'The Vagabond' in the *Argus*, he revealed to the public numerous abuses of power and the squalid conditions facing the marginalised and disenfranchised of colonial Victoria. The reports published in the *Argus* led to significant political reforms and public outcry for social justice. His work is also a window into the lives of working-class and poor colonial Victorians.

His identity was a mystery, and his articles became the talk of Melbourne and the source of ire to the institutions he exposed. Some members of the public even speculated that he was an official from Government House nobly motivated by a concern for society's less privileged.

James eventually revealed his identity to the public and, in so doing, punctured much of the mystique that had developed around his 'Vagabond' persona. Yet his legacy remains as a fascinating exploration of the lives of the poor and disenfranchised in

nineteenth century Victoria and the numerous reforms driven by the public outcry fomented by his publications.

The Vagabond as Social Reformer is the accumulated collections of articles by John Stanley James, edited and introduced by Michael Cannon. It is an invaluable resource into life in colonial Victoria and the issues faced by asylums, prisons, hospitals, unions, benevolent asylums and others. His writing is detailed, profound, eminently quotable in its prose, and always driven with a sympathetic eye for those who suffer with an eye for social justice and reform.

The work is helpfully collected into themes such as 'Melbourne's Lunatic Asylums of the 1870s', 'Treatment of Aged Paupers', 'The Problem of Fallen Women' and 'The Alfred Hospital'. It is easy to search and locate material on specific topics. The book is wide-ranging, shifting from discussions of mental illness, the causes of crime, and the injustices and exclusion facing nineteenth century women to race among many other topics.

This work is an essential aid to exploring the lives of nineteenth century Australians, and brings out a depth of perspective, personal experience and sensitivity that enriches any study of the period.