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CHARLES DICKENS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Iain Crawford

Whatever he did, he did with all his heart and soul and strength. The munificent sacrifices he made of time, money, and sympathy to men of letters, to artists, to obscure persons who had not the shadow of a claim on him will never be summed up. There are thousands of persons living who could bear grateful testimony to this boundless generosity of his nature.

Writing thus in its obituary following his death in June 1870, the Athenaeum caught precisely that charismatic ability to empathize with others which has been at the heart of Dickens’s appeal to readers from the 1830’s to this day. For Dickens is that rarest of authors: one whose readers are to be found in all parts of the world, at all stages of life, and in each and every generation. Such is especially the case in the United States, where Dickens has long enjoyed one of his most devoted followings, and nowhere is this more so than in Massachusetts. For it was to the Bay State that Dickens first came when he visited America and it was with the Commonwealth that he formed his earliest and closest ties to the new world.

What first brought Dickens to the United States? What was it that especially drew him to New England? Why did he enjoy this part of the young country more than any other? And how does his relationship with Massachusetts continue?

Dickens travelled to America twice. He first came in 1842 when, at the height of his youthful popularity, he and his wife ventured across the Atlantic in the midst of winter to explore the new democracy of which he had such great expectations. Like many a first-time visitor to a new country, Dickens did not really appreciate what he was taking on, as is suggested by his initial plan to hire “a carriage, a baggage tender... a negro boy and a saddle horse” with which he would trek from Columbia, South Carolina “through the wilds of Kentucky and Tennessee, across the Allegheny Mountains, and so on until we should strike the lakes and get to Canada.” Fortunately, and especially given the faint grasp of local geography this passage suggests, he was dissuaded. Instead, he spent the little more than four months he passed in the country travelling mostly in the northeast and midwest.

There he found much that he admired but also a great deal which surprised and disappointed him. The vigor and friendliness of Americans appealed to his own generous nature, while their willingness to embrace social experimentation drew his enthusiastic interest. At the same time, he was appalled by what, to European eyes, seemed the brash vulgarity of American manners—spitting was a source of particular disgust—and horrified that a democracy founded on egalitarian principles continued to tolerate slavery. To these larger affronts was added a sense of more personal injury, since Dickens was much affected by the absence of international copyright laws, an omission which had led to his work being pirated and published in America without any payment to him whatsoever. Unable to restrain himself from comment upon this inequity and the broader limitations of American culture and society, Dickens did not entirely endear himself to his host country and he went considerably further to antagonize it by the unflattering portraits which followed in his travel book, American Notes (1842), and, especially, in the novel which soon followed it, Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-4).

For, drawing upon his own recent journey, Dickens sends the novel’s eponymous hero across the ocean to seek his fortune in America and, in the course of describing Martin’s social and spiritual journeying, he offers a sav-
age indictment of the worst features of the new world. Upon arriving in New York, for instance, Martin is greeted by a press that would do credit to more modern tabloids:

"Here's this morning's New York Sewer!" cried one. "Here's this morning's New York Stabber! Here's the New York Family Spy! Here's the New York Private Listener! Here's the New York Peeper! Here's the New York Plunderer! Here's the New York Keyhole Reporter! Here's the New York Rowdy Journal! Here's all the New York papers! Here's full particulars of the patriotic locofoco movement yesterday, in which the whigs was so chawed up; and the last Alabama gouging case; and the interesting Arkansas duel with Bowie knives.

Later in his travels Martin will come across a certain Hannibal Chollop, "a splendid sample of our native raw material," as one of his compatriots describes him, and who is ironically eulogized as an example of the ignoble savagery this new society has thrown up: "he is a true-born child of this free hemisphere! Verdant as the mountains of our country; bright and flowing as our mineral Licks; unspiled by withering conventionalities as air our broad and boundless Perearers! Rough he may be. So air our Barrs. Wild he may be. So air our Buffalers. But he is a child of Natur', and a child of Freedom; and his boastful answer to the Despot and the Tyrant is, that his bright home is in the Settin Sun."

Despite the disappointment and difficulties of this first relationship with America, Dickens had gained much from the visit: he became consciously aware of his own national identity, his intrinsic Englishness, in a way that only exposure to the foreign can ensure; he came to understand the distance between idealized visions of the unknown and the actual realities of social experiment; and, perhaps most of all, he gained a number of close friends through whom he would gradually temper and enrich his sense of America.

However, it would be more than a quarter of a century before Dickens would return to America and when he did so it would be during the last years of his life and as a rather different figure from the young writer of 1842. During the 1860's Dickens added a new career to the many he had already pursued: he became a pub-

...
Future, and the interview of Scrooge with his clerk the morning after Christmas—without marrying propinquitous; it lent additional snap to the spiteful drinking of Scrooge’s health by Bob Cratchit’s wife; and it made Mr. Dickens’s special forte of oddity and raciness in description more exceedingly Dickensy than his admirers even had a comprehension of.

How successful the performance actually was remains unclear: two days later, Dickens wrote of it to his daughter “I read with my utmost force and vigor.” But both the Standard and the New Bedford Mercury comment on the audience’s muted response and, though the latter politely concludes that “They are fortunate who have seen and heard Mr. Dickens,” we are left to wonder whether the Victorian superstar was entirely able to overcome the difficulties of travelling through the snow, wretched health, and an audience which turned out to be the smallest and least remunerative of his tour.

However, even if circumstances may have conspired to bring less than his best out of Dickens on this one evening, the general success of his visit is not in question, and it not only undid any lingering rancor from his 1842 stay but cemented the affection felt for him in America. Moreover, on his side, too, the visit did much to correct some of his earlier misunderstandings and confirmed to him that the new democracy did, indeed, have much to offer a visitor from the old world. What was it, though, in particular which appealed to him? And what, precisely, was it about New England which gave him his happiest associations with America?

On both his visits Dickens first set foot on land in Boston, and it was this most European of American cities that did much to enamor him. Putting up at the Tremont Hotel in 1842, Dickens immediately discovered, as has many a traveller before and since, that the two nations are indeed divided by a common language. For, in endeavoring to order his dinner, he learned that “right away” was not an exclamation but a question, not a phrase of agreement but an inquiry as to timing, and it took the efforts of two waiters to ensure that the famous author received his food then and there rather than at some unascertainable future point. Notwithstanding this initial linguistic confusion, Dickens soon enjoyed “a capital dinner” and then went out to discover a city of brilliantly painted white houses, intensely colored brickwork, signs, and even railings, and with a central core (the area around Beacon Hill and the Common) which charmed him to perfection. As he came to know Boston better, he began to liken it to Edinburgh, that so-called “Athens of the North,” his wife’s native town and the home of many of his Scottish friends. Boston, where he found a similar blend of friendship and intellectual delight, naturally assumed a similar place in his affections, even if, on his return in 1868, he would comment, again as have so many later visitors, on his shock at learning that “the cost of living is enormous.”

While the city itself charmed him, even more important were the friends he made there and across the river in Cambridge. For many of Dickens’s closest friendships came to be with Americans, and most of these Americans were from Massachusetts: John Quincy Adams, Emerson, and Longfellow, for example, or publisher James Fields and his wife Annie. These friends, themselves at the heart of America’s extraordinarily rich cultural and intellectual life in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, became defining parts of Dickens’s sense of the best of America, and it is a measure of how closely attached to them he became that two of the most insightful comments upon him originate with this group. Emerson, first, who after watching one of the public readings in 1868, confirmed what their toll must have been: “I am afraid he has too much talent for his genius; and it is a fearful locomotive to which he is bound and can never be free from it nor set at rest.” And then there is a poignant observation by Annie Fields, Dickens’s Boston hostess during the second visit, who noted what a “wonderful flow of the spirits Charles Dickens has for such a sad man.” Such observations are not to be made by casual acquaintances, and it is surely a strong indication of how close Dickens

Charles Eliot Norton, a man not given to hyperbole, gloweringly described:

No one thinks first of Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend. . . He is the greatest magician of our time. His wand is a book, but his power is in his own heart. It is a rare piece of good fortune for us that we are the contemporaries of this benevolent genius.

Nor could Dickens himself be unhappy with the success of a tour that saw him carry home the then enormous profit of $100,000. Yet he paid a high price for his success, often being so ill that he was barely able to perform, and there seems little doubt that the exertions of the trip hastened his death two years later at the age of only fifty-eight.

Many of these readings took place in New England, and one that was given in southeastern Massachusetts typifies much of the tour. On March 27, 1868 Dickens read to over eight hundred people at Liberty Hall in New Bedford. Although little has been subsequently published about this visit, the local press of the day provides a rich record. Dickens travelled down from Boston on the train via Taunton, put up at a local hotel, and, promptly at eight o’clock, began a two-hour presentation in Liberty Hall. His program was one he gave frequently—A Christmas Carol and the trial scene from The Pickwick Papers—and he gave it to an audience which had paid the then princely price of $2 a head in an age when theatre tickets ran to fifty or seventy-five cents. In its review the following day, the New Bedford Evening Standard offers an unusually detailed critique of the performance. After noting that Dickens began almost inaudibly and with some affectation in his pronunciation and manner, the reviewer describes his warming to the work and his developing style as easy and harmonious with itself, without being dull or monotonous. His liveliness of manner even went into the most pathetic and thrilling portions of the text, the allusions to Tiny Tim in the presence of the Spirit of Christmas in the Future, and the interview of Scrooge with
grew to this country and its people that these comments should have been made by his American friends. But if the private side of American life was one source of the country’s appeal to Dickens, another inspiration lay in its public institutions and their representation of the new democracy at work. With entirely characteristic energy, he speedily followed his arrival in 1842 with a whirlwind tour of the new society. Walking through South Boston, he visited the Perkins Institute for the Blind, the Boylston School, and then the State Hospital for the Insane. He subsequently moved on by train to visit both Worcester and Lowell, observing American industrial life and taking a special interest in the paternalistic ordering of the Lowell community. What he saw intrigued and impressed him to such an extent that, even in the often critical pages of American Notes, he was able to write:

Above all, I sincerely believe that the public institutions and charities of this capital of Massachusetts are as nearly perfect, as the most considerate wisdom, benevolence, and humanity, can make them. I never in my life was more affected by the contemplation of happiness... than in my visits to these establishments.

Readers in the age of Mike Barnicle and less happy renditions of the Commonwealth’s public life might wonder which state of Massachusetts Dickens had seen... Nevertheless, his enthusiasm for the public world clearly matched that he felt for the private, and the two come together most clearly in Dickens’s response to his favorite part of Massachusetts, Cambridge and the society around Harvard. For, in writing of America’s oldest university, he defined for himself and his readers what it was in the country’s liberal arts tradition that most deeply mirrored its democratic ideals:

Whatever the defects of American universities may be, they disseminate no prejudices; rear no bigots; dig up the buried ashes of no old superstitions; never

interpose between the people and their improvement; exclude no man because of his religious opinions; above all, in their whole course of study and instruction, recognise a world, and a broad one too, lying beyond the college walls.

Despite confusions over language and geography, despite his first disappointment with American manners, despite his horror at the worst excesses of the still rawly new democracy, Dickens was, finally, very much at home in a country which in so many ways embodied his own central values. Professor Michael Slater has perhaps best expressed the nature of a relationship which, if often ambivalent, was none the less profound. For Dickens, Professor Slater writes,

was a natural American and therefore had the same love/hate relationship with America as he had with the country of his birth. In his touchy pride, his ruthless energy, his unwavering belief in the rewards of industry, his rejection of the past, and his faith in the future Dickens was very much an American.

At Bridgewater State College we, too, are fortunate in being able to share in this relationship between Charles Dickens and America. To borrow from my opening quotation, we too have been the beneficiaries of “boundless generosity.” In our case, it is that of the late President Maxwell, who bequeathed his own library to the college. As a result, a superb collection of first and early editions of Dickens, memorabilia, and a fine array of twentieth century scholarship on Dickens and the Victorian period as a whole is available to us. Housed in the Maxwell Library’s Special Collections room and under the care of Ms. Mabell Bates, this is one of the hidden treasures of the college and of particular interest to all lovers of literature. Happily, through recent donations by the class of ’46, the collection will continue to grow and become more accessible to future students of Dickens. As a result, we will all be able to at least try and satisfy that insatiable appetite for the Inimitable Boz which Leonardo Cattermole, one of his early illustrators, defines so wonderfully and thereby catches the spirit in Dickens which continues to draw readers in Massachusetts, and throughout the world, to him:

Who could tell a story like he did? rivetting the attention from start to finish, holding his audience magnetically, selecting his subtle tools of narrative and using them always in the right place with effect, carrying his audience entirely with him by means of that power he had of building his story without lumber or extraneous non-important matter, feeding his listeners without sating them, leaving them always like his own Oliver, wanting “more”!

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