

Dickens in America

The enduring popularity of Charles Dickens (1812–70) in the West is nowhere more evident than in America. All of his novels from *Pickwick Papers* to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, are readily available in good bookstores, and there has been a recent surge of scholarly interest in England's muckraking novelist. Recently published have been a new biography, *Dickens: A Life*, by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie; a revised paperback edition of Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*; and Michael Slater's *Dickens on America and the Americans*. Here we present Robert R. Harris' discussion of the great author's trips to America and excerpts from Dickens' own voluminous observations on the new republic.

by Robert R. Harris

"Is Little Nell dead?" shouted people in the waiting crowds on Manhattan docks to the passengers on incoming vessels from England.

A year before he came to the United States in 1842, Dickens enthralled Americans with his story of an innocent girl and her senile grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The novel appeared in Britain in serialized episodes (in *Master Humphrey's Clock*) that were subsequently pirated by U.S. newspapers.

It was a time when popular novelists attracted the kind of attention reserved today for Hollywood entertainers, rock stars, and TV anchormen. Dickens was a trans-

Atlantic celebrity, and Little Nell a household name.

Dickens' own story was not quite rags to riches—but close to it.

His life reads like one of his novels. Dickens was the eldest of eight children of a feckless clerk in the Naval Pay Office in Portsmouth. In 1822, the family moved to London. A few days before Dickens' father, John, went to debtor's prison in 1824, Charles, then just 12, was sent to work 12 hours a day in a blacking factory, wrapping and labeling pots of paste-black (used for boots and fire-grates). Although he toiled in the factory for only four months, he was angered and humiliated.

"Even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London," he wrote later, "no one had compassion enough on me—a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally—to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school."

Yet Dickens was to make good use of these early experiences. *David Copperfield*, his most popular novel and the one he liked best, is in many of its details veiled autobiography; the character Micawber has many of John Dickens' traits. A comically overdrawn portrait of Charles's mother, who favored sending him to work in the factory, is found in the character of Mrs. Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby*. And the time in the blacking factory accounted both for Dickens' irrational fear of poverty when success came and for the fascination with London's underclass so evident in his novels.

When John Dickens received a small inheritance in 1824, Charles went to Wellington House Academy, a commercial school. In 1827, he was hired as a legal clerk, taught himself shorthand, and, in 1830 at age 18, became a legal reporter for several London newspapers, covering court cases, the House of Commons ("particularly strong in clowns," he wrote), and, later, the House of Lords.

As a budding freelance journalist, Dickens walked London's streets during the riots that accompanied the struggles over Parliamentary reform, attended public hangings, visited prisons, went often to the theater, and reported on political meetings in and outside of London. In 1835, the *Evening Chronicle* published his first essay under the pen



In 1867, Bostonians stood in lines a half-mile long to buy tickets to Dickens' readings, which were later published. Above is the cover of an 1876 edition, published in Boston.

name Boz, criticizing London manners and morals. His literary career was launched. His essays were soon published as a book, *Sketches by Boz*, and his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, was in serialization by the time he was 24.

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, eldest daughter of George Hogarth, Dickens' editor at the *Evening Chronicle*. Charles and "Kate" had 10 children before he left her in 1858 for Ellen Ternan, a 19-year-old actress who performed in one of the many plays Dickens was fond of staging. Ellen, 27 years younger than Dickens, remained his mistress for the rest of his life.

With the success of *Sketches* and *Pickwick* (originally intended by

Dickens as a series of follow-up journalistic pieces to *Sketches*), Dickens had become a renowned journalist. He founded three weekly publications: *Master Humphrey's Clock* (1841), solely a vehicle for his fiction; *Household Words* (1850); and *All the Year Round* (1859), which reflected his social concerns.

Dickens was an advocacy journalist and his muckraking articles earned him a reputation as champion of the underdog. In his weeklies and in pamphlets, he berated his countrymen for their neglect of the poor; opposed child labor, slavery, public executions, and capital punishment; raised funds for schools for slum children and for rehabilitating prostitutes; exposed the living and working conditions of coal miners and factory workers. He portrayed in his novels the special horrors for children of poverty and adult cruelty (*Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *David Copperfield*); life in debtor's prison (*Little Dorrit*); greed and the exploitation of the working class (*Hard Times*).

His weapons, writes biographer Edgar Johnson, were caricature and burlesque, melodrama and unrestrained sentiment, ridicule and exaggeration. If nothing else, he stirred Britain's new middle class into awareness of serious social issues.

Intrigued by republican America, Dickens yearned to set "foot upon the soil I have trodden in my day-dreams many times." When he finished *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841, he had been writing without let-up for five years. He decided to go to the United States, which symbolized for Dickens the democratic ways that he hoped England would embrace. He

also wanted to leave his mark on the New World: "Washington Irving writes me that if I went," he told a friend, "it would be a triumph for me from one end of the States to the other."

Culture Shock

He planned to write a travel book that would set right the distortions in such earlier works as Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of Americans* (1832), which claimed that American society was one "of jarring tumult and universal degradation."

When Dickens arrived in Boston aboard the sailing ship *Britannia* in January 1842, he was welcomed as an international celebrity. He was feted at dinner parties and a public ball; he hobnobbed with novelist Richard Henry Dana, Jr., historian George Bancroft, poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell; and he visited the state capital, a courthouse, a seamen's chapel, and Harvard.

Although their newspapers nicknamed Boston "Boz-town" when they learned of Dickens' tumultuous reception there, New Yorkers were determined to outdo the New Englanders. When Dickens arrived in Manhattan, his hosts threw an even bigger ball than had been held in Boston, and Washington Irving held a public dinner. Insatiably curious, the English visitor inspected the Tombs prison, the turbulent Irish slums of the city's Five Points district, and a lunatic asylum on Long Island.

The mutual admiration between Dickens and the Americans was dampened when Dickens spoke out (in Boston and Hartford) in favor of

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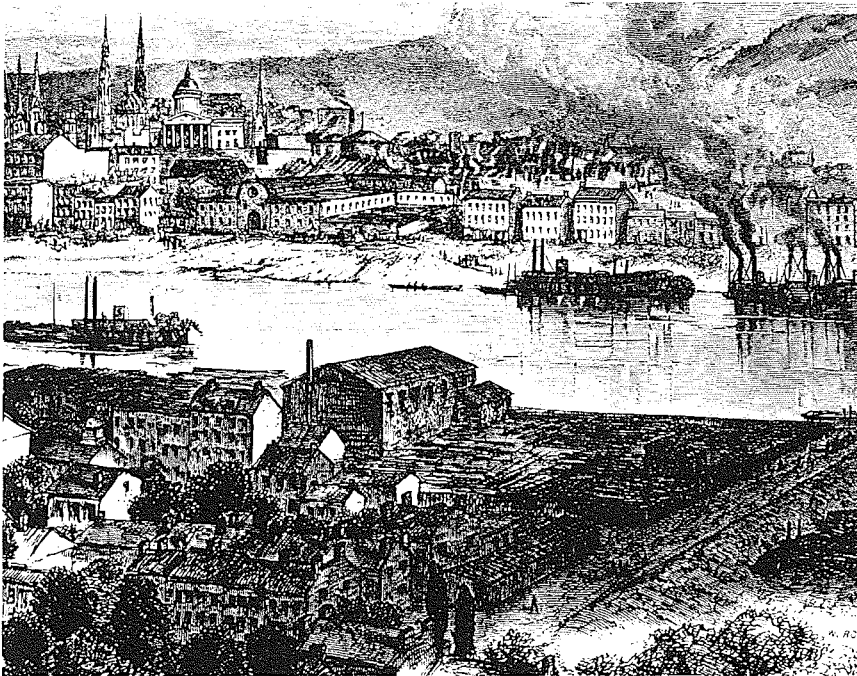
an international copyright law; and the U.S. press excoriated him for raising the issue. "Some of the vagabonds," Dickens shot back, "take great credit to themselves . . . for having made me popular by publishing my books in newspapers: as if there were no England, no Scotland, no Germany, no place but America in the whole world."

After his squabbles with the press began, Dickens' feelings toward the New World turned sour. He complained about the railroads and the hotels and was offended by the Americans' rough-and-ready manners—a kind of culture shock.

Dickens' observations in letters home became more caustic ("This is

not the Republic of my imagination. . . . In everything of which it has made a boast—excepting its education of people, and its care for poor children—it sinks immeasurably below the level I had placed it upon"). However, his desire for first-hand knowledge of the United States was still strong. Dickens continued his travels.

In Philadelphia, he met Edgar Allan Poe and visited the Eastern Penitentiary, where he was appalled by the practice of putting prisoners in solitary confinement. He traveled by rail to Washington, Richmond, and Baltimore. By steamer, he went down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi to St. Louis. He witnessed a



"Pittsburgh," wrote Dickens in *American Notes*, "is like Birmingham in England; at least its townspeople say so. . . . It certainly has a great quantity of smoke hanging about it, and is famous for its ironworks."



American cartoonists, including Thomas Nast, delighted in needling Dickens about the money he made from his readings and in portraying him (falsely) as a speaker of Cockney dialect. This newspaper cartoon, "Dickens's Farewell to Hamerica," appeared in 1868 after the author's second visit to the New World.

slavery and empathy for Southern blacks.

Regarding the war, says Michael Slater, "as entirely a matter of dollars and political struggles," Dickens "was happy to use the southern cause . . . to belabour his old Yankee enemies" in the Northern press.

Unlike his first trip to the United States, which Dickens undertook largely out of curiosity, Dickens' second tour (December 1867–April 1868) was spurred almost entirely by a false sense of financial insecurity. In 1858, Dickens had begun giving dramatic readings of his works; they were extremely popular. He was a wealthy man. But, haunted by childhood memories, he feared economic ruin. "A life begun as a flight from poverty," write his biographers, Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, "was ending in a compulsive search for cash." The lure of U.S. dollars was overwhelming.

On his return to America, Dickens saw many of the cities he had seen 25 years earlier. The old feuds were forgotten. His dramatic readings were sell-outs. In New York, 40,000 people heard him read his own works; \$2 tickets were scalped at \$20 or more. Dickens netted almost \$200,000 in America.

He completed his tour with a glow-

temperance festival in Cincinnati, then journeyed by stagecoach 120 miles to Columbus. In upstate New York, he visited a Shaker village, Niagara Falls, and West Point.

When Dickens returned to England after six months in America, he set to work on *American Notes*. Although he praised the American people for their frankness, bravery, and cordiality, his disappointment with the United States was clear. The book was attacked by the U.S. press (whose editors nevertheless pirated it) but read avidly by Americans. The *New York Herald* printed it within 19 hours of receipt and sold 50,000 copies in two days; in Philadelphia, 3,000 copies were bought in half an hour.

Dickens' interest in things American continued. He published a few antislavery pieces in 1860 and 1861 in his weekly *All the Year Round*; but Dickens believed that slavery had little to do with the Civil War, and he questioned the North's hatred of

ing testimony at a press banquet at Delmonico's in Manhattan, praising the "amazing changes" he had observed in America and promising to include his compliments in future editions of *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. But the grueling winter trip, which friends had advised him against, took a toll of Dickens' health. He died two years later in 1870 at age 58.

Edgar Johnson has written that

the unifying thread in all Dickens' prose was a "critical analysis of 19th-century society unsurpassed by any novelist in grasp or scope." Dickens turned his journalist's eye on mid-19th-century America, and his observations in 1842—recorded in his letters, in *American Notes*, and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*—on its people, customs, and institutions remain fresh and vivid more than a century after he wrote them.



AN ENGLISHMAN IN AMERICA

Dickens arrived in Boston in January 1842. By March 15th, when he wrote this, he had visited New England, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington.

Americans are friendly, earnest, hospitable, kind, frank, very often accomplished, far less prejudiced than you would suppose, warm-hearted, fervent, and enthusiastic. They are chivalrous in their universal politeness to women, courteous, obliging, disinterested; and, when they conceive a perfect affection for a man (as I may venture to say of myself), entirely devoted to him.

I have received thousands of people of all ranks and grades, and have never once been asked an offensive or unpolite question—except by Englishmen, who, when they have been "located" here for some years, are worse than the devil in his blackest painting.

The State is a parent to its people; has a parental care and watch over

all poor children, women labouring of child, sick persons, and captives. The common men render you assistance in the streets, and would revolt from the offer of a piece of money. The desire to oblige is universal; and I have never once travelled in a public conveyance, without making some generous acquaintance whom I have been sorry to part from, and who has in many cases come on miles, to see us again.

But I don't like the country. I would not live here, on any consideration. It goes against the grain with me. I think it impossible, utterly impossible, for any Englishman to live here, and be happy.

From a letter to Dickens' friend and biographer, John Forster

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AFTER-DINNER CONVERSATION

Dickens' wrote Martin Chuzzlewit in 1843. Here the young hero, fresh from England, surveys his fellow lodgers at a Manhattan boarding house.

It was a numerous company, 18 or 20 perhaps. Of these some five or six were ladies, who sat wedged together in a little phalanx by themselves. . . .

After dinner several of the gentlemen got up, one by one, and walked off as they swallowed their last morsel; pausing generally by the stove for a minute or so to refresh themselves at the brass spittoons. A few sedentary characters, however, remained at table full a quarter of an hour, and did not rise until the ladies rose, when all stood up.

'Where are they going?' asked Martin, in the ear of Mr. Jefferson Brick.

'To their bedrooms, sir.'

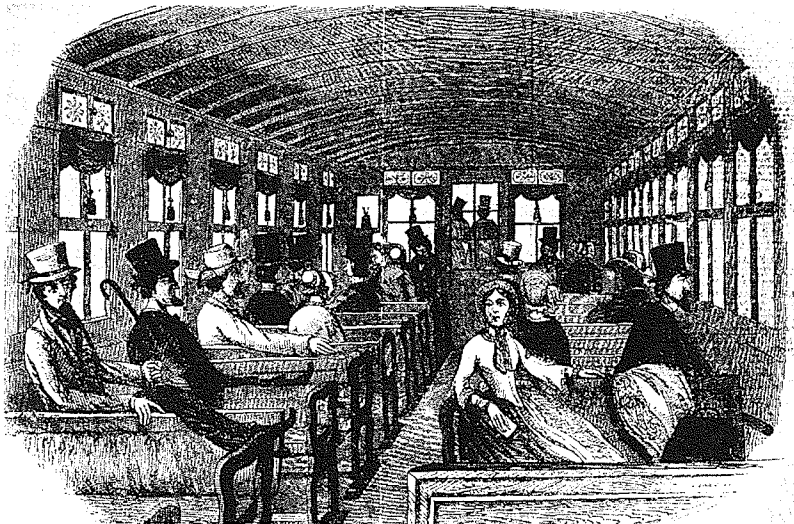
'Is there no dessert, or other interval of conversation?' asked Martin, who was disposed to enjoy himself

after his long voyage.

'We are a busy people here, sir, and have no time for that,' was the reply.

So the ladies passed out in single file; Mr. Jefferson Brick and such other married gentlemen as were left, acknowledging the departure of their other halves by a nod; and there was an end of *them*.

Martin thought this an uncomfortable custom, but he kept his opinion to himself for the present, being anxious to hear, and inform himself by, the conversation of the busy gentlemen, who now lounged about the stove as if a great weight had been taken off their minds by the withdrawal of the other sex; and who made a plentiful use of the spittoons and their toothpicks.



It was rather barren of interest, to say the truth; and the greater part of it may be summed up in one word. Dollars. All their cares, hopes, joys, affections, virtues, and associations, seemed to be melted down into dollars.

Whatever the chance contributions that fell into the slow cauldron of their talk, they made the gruel thick and slab with dollars. Men were weighed by their dollars, measures

gauged by their dollars; life was auctioneered, appraised, put up, and knocked down for its dollars.

The next respectable thing to dollars was any venture having their attainment for its end. Make commerce one huge lie and mighty theft. Deface the banner of the nation for an idle rag; pollute it star by star; and cut out stripe by stripe as from the arm of a degraded soldier. Do anything for dollars! What is a flag to *them*!



A VISIT TO A CINCINNATI SCHOOL

"Cincinnati," wrote Dickens, was "honourably famous for its free schools."

Cincinnati is a beautiful city; cheerful, thriving, and animated. I have not often seen a place that commends itself so favourably and pleasantly to a stranger at the first glance as this does: with its clean houses of red and white, its well-paved roads, and foot-ways of bright tile. Nor does it become less prepossessing on a closer acquaintance. . . .

[The town's free schools are] so many that no person's child among its population, can, by possibility, want the means of education, which are extended, upon an average, to 4,000 pupils, annually.

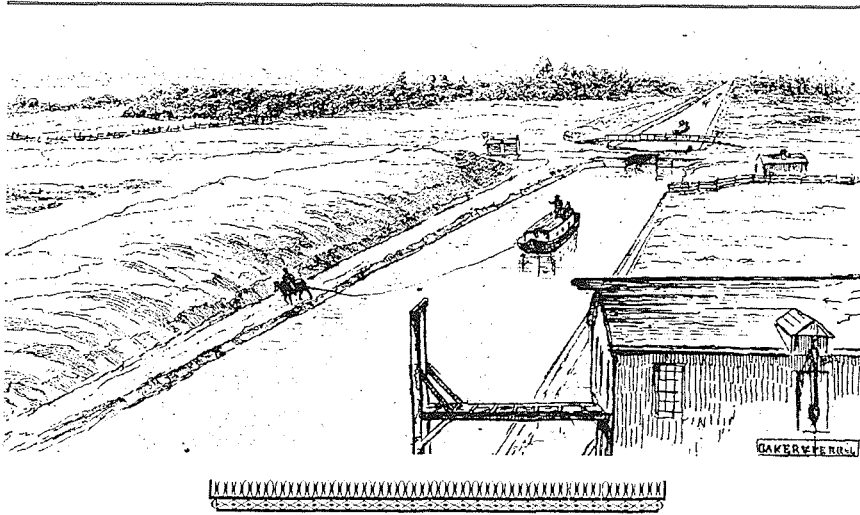
I was only present in one of these establishments during the hours of instruction. In the boys' department, which was full of little urchins (varying in their ages, I should say, from 6 years old to 10 or 12), the master offered to institute an extemporary examination of the pupils in algebra; a proposal, which, as I was by no means confident of my ability to detect mistakes in that science, I de-

clined with some alarm.

In the girls' school, reading was proposed; and as I felt tolerably equal to that art, I expressed my willingness to hear a class. Books were distributed accordingly, and some half-dozen relieved each other in reading paragraphs from English history. But it seemed to be a dry compilation, infinitely above their powers; and when they had blundered through three or four dreary passages concerning the Treaty of Amiens, and other thrilling topics of the same nature (obviously without comprehending 10 words), I expressed myself quite satisfied.

It is very possible that they only mounted to this exalted stave in the Ladder of Learning for the astonishment of a visitor; and that at other times they keep upon its lower rounds; but I should have been much better pleased and satisfied if I had heard them exercised in simpler lessons, which they understood.

From American Notes



LIFE ON A CANAL BOAT

Traveling on the Pennsylvania Canal from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, Dickens found his fellow passengers as exotic as they found him.

Bless your heart and soul, my dear fellow,—if you could only see us on board the canal boat! Let me think, for a moment, at what time of the day or night I should best like you to see us.

In the morning? Between five and six in the morning, shall I say? Well! you *would* like to see me, standing on the deck, fishing the dirty water out of the canal with a tin ladle chained to the boat by a long chain; pouring the same into a tin-basin (also chained up in like manner); and scrubbing my face with the jack towel.

At night, shall I say? I don't know that you *would* like to look into the cabin at night, only to see me lying on a temporary shelf exactly the width of this sheet of paper when it's open (*I measured it this morning*), with one man above me, and another below; and, in all, 8 and 20 in a low

cabin, which you can't stand upright in with your hat on.

I don't think you would like to look in at breakfast time either, for then these shelves have only just been taken down and put away, and the atmosphere of the place is, as you may suppose, by no means fresh; though there *are* upon the table tea and coffee, and bread and butter, and salmon, and shad, and liver, and steak, and potatoes, and pickles, and ham, and pudding, and sausages; and 3 and 30 people sitting round it, eating and drinking; and savoury bottles of gin, and whiskey, and brandy, and rum, in the bar hard by; and 7 and 20 out of the 8 and 20 men, in foul linen, with yellow streams from half-chewed tobacco trickling down their chins.

Perhaps the best time for you to take a peep would be the present: 11 o'clock in the forenoon: when the

barber is at his shaving, and the gentlemen are lounging about the stove waiting for their turns, and not more than 17 are spitting in concert.

I am writing this in the ladies'-cabin, which is a part of the gentlemen's, and only screened off by a red curtain. Indeed it exactly resembles the dwarf's private apartment in a caravan at a fair; and the gentlemen, generally, represent the spectators at a penny-a-head. The place is just as clean and just as large as that caravan you and I were in at Greenwich-fair last past. Outside, it is exactly like any canal-boat you have seen near the Regent's-park, or elsewhere. . . .

I am considered very hardy in the morning, for I run up, bare-necked,

and plunge my head into the half-frozen water, by half-past five o'clock. I am respected for my activity, inasmuch as I jump from the boat to the towing-path, and walk five or six miles before breakfast, keeping up with the horses all the time.

In a word, they are quite astonished to find a sedentary Englishman roughing it so well, and taking so much exercise; and question me very much on that head.

The greater part of the men will sit and shiver round the stove all day, rather than put one foot before the other. As to having a window open, that's not to be thought of.

From a March 28, 1842, letter to John Forster



THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

A portrait of the river at its junction with the Ohio, near Cairo, Illinois.

But what words shall describe the Mississippi, great father of rivers, who (praise be to Heaven) has no young children like him!

An enormous ditch, sometimes two or three miles wide, running liquid mud, six miles an hour: its strong and frothy current choked and obstructed everywhere by huge logs and whole forest trees: now twining themselves together in great rafts, from the interstices of which a sedgy lazy foam works up, to float upon the water's top; now rolling past like monstrous bodies, their tangled roots showing like matted hair; now

glancing singly by like giant leeches; and now writhing round and round in the vortex of some small whirl-pool, like wounded snakes.

The banks low, the trees dwarfish, the marshes swarming with frogs, the wretched cabins few and far apart, their inmates hollow-cheeked and pale, the weather very hot, mosquitoes penetrating into every crack and crevice of the boat, mud and slime on everything: nothing pleasant in its aspect, but the harmless lightning which flickers every night upon the dark horizon.

From American Notes



FACTORY GIRLS

Dickens had visited many grim manufacturing towns in England; the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, gave him some surprises.

These girls were all well dressed: and that phrase necessarily includes extreme cleanliness. They had serviceable bonnets, good warm cloaks, and shawls; and were not above clogs and pattens. Moreover, there were places in which they could deposit these things without injury; and there were conveniences for washing.

They were healthy in appearance, many of them remarkably so, and had the manners and deportment of young women: not of degraded brutes of burden.

The rooms in which they worked, were as well ordered as themselves. In the windows of some, there were green plants, which were trained to shade the glass; in all, there was as much fresh air, cleanliness, and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit of.

Out of so large a number of females, many of whom were only then just verging upon womanhood, it may be reasonably supposed that some were delicate and fragile in appearance: no doubt there were. But I solemnly declare, that from all the crowd I saw in the different factories that day, I cannot recall one young face that gave me a painful impression; nor one young girl whom, assuming it to be matter of necessity that she should gain her daily bread by the labour of her hands, I would have removed from those works if I had had the power. . . .

I am now going to state three facts, which will startle a large class of readers on this side of the Atlantic.

Firstly, there is a joint-stock piano

in a great many of the boarding-houses. Secondly, nearly all these young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries. Thirdly, they have got up among themselves a periodical called *THE LOWELL OFFERING*, "A repository of original articles, written exclusively by females actively employed in the mills,"—which is duly printed, published, and sold; and whereof I brought away from Lowell 400 good solid pages, which I have read from beginning to end.

The large class of readers, startled by these facts, will exclaim, with one voice, "How very preposterous!" On my deferentially inquiring why, they will answer, "These things are above their station." In reply to that objection, I would beg to ask what their station is.

It is their station to work. And they *do* work. They labour in these mills, upon an average, 12 hours a day, which is unquestionably work, and pretty tight work too.

Perhaps it is above their station to indulge in such amusements, on any terms. Are we quite sure that we in England have not formed our ideas of the "station" of working people, from accustoming ourselves to the contemplation of that class as they are, and not as they might be? I think that if we examine our own feelings, we shall find that the pianos, and the circulating libraries, and even the *Lowell Offering*, startle us by their novelty, and not by their bearing upon any abstract question of right or wrong.

From American Notes



Guest of the Governor of Massachusetts, Dickens spent a weekend in Worcester in February 1842. Of New England he later wrote, "delicate slopes of land, gently-swelling hills, wooded valleys, and slender streams, abound."



SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA

Traveling by rail from Fredericksburg to Richmond, the English author got his first views of the South and its "peculiar" system of slavery.

In this district, as in all others where slavery sits brooding, (I have frequently heard this admitted, even by those who are its warmest advocates;) there is an air of ruin and decay abroad, which is inseparable from the system.

The barns and outhouses are mouldering away; the sheds are patched and half roofless; the log cabins (built with external chimneys made of clay or wood) are squalid in the last degree.

There is no look of decent comfort anywhere. The miserable stations by

the railway side; the great wild wood-yards, whence the engine is supplied with fuel; the negro children rolling on the ground before the cabin doors, with dogs and pigs; the biped beasts of burden slinking past: gloom and dejection are upon them all.

In the negro car belonging to the train in which we made this journey, were a mother and her children who had just been purchased; the husband and father being left behind with their old owner. The children cried the whole way, and the mother

was misery's picture. The champion of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, who had bought them, rode in the same train; and, every time we stopped, got down to see that they were safe. The black in

Sinbad's Travels with one eye in the middle of his forehead which shone like a burning coal, was nature's aristocrat compared with this white gentleman.

From American Notes



CONGRESSMEN AT WORK

Dickens visited both Houses of Congress during a week-long stay in Washington.

Did I see in this public body an assemblage of men, bound together in the sacred names of Liberty, and Freedom, and so asserting the chaste dignity of those twin goddesses, in all their discussions, as to exalt at once the Eternal Principles to which their names are given, and their own character and the character of their countrymen, in the admiring eyes of the whole world?

I saw in them, the wheels that move the meanest perversion of virtuous Political Machinery that the worst tools ever wrought. Despicable trickery at elections; under-handed tamperings with public officers; cowardly attacks upon opponents, with scurrilous newspapers for shields, and hired pens for daggers; shameful trucklings to mercenary knaves, whose claim to be considered, is, that every day and week they sow new crops of ruin with their venal types, which are the dragon's teeth of yore, in everything but sharpness; aidings and abettings of every bad inclination in the popular mind, and artful suppressions of all its good influences: such things as these, and in a word, Dishonest Fac-

tion in its most depraved and most unblushing form, stared out from every corner of the crowded hall. . . .

It is the game of these men, and of their profligate organs, to make the strife of politics so fierce and brutal, and so destructive of all self-respect in worthy men, that sensitive and delicate-minded persons shall be kept aloof, and they, and such as they, be left to battle out their selfish views unchecked. And thus this lowest of all scrambling fights goes on, and they who in other countries would, from their intelligence and station, most aspire to make the laws, do here recoil the farthest from that degradation.

That there are, among the representatives of the people in both Houses, and among all parties, some men of high character and great abilities, I need not say. . . .

They are striking men to look at, hard to deceive, prompt to act, lions in energy, Indians in fire of eye and gesture, Americans in strong and generous impulse; and they as well represent the honour and wisdom of their country at home.

From American Notes



A VISIT TO THE PRESIDENT

Occupying the White House in 1842 was John Tyler, who as Vice President succeeded William Henry Harrison after Harrison died in office in 1841.

I was taken there [the White House] by the Secretary to the Senate: a namesake of mine, whom "John Tyler" had dispatched to carry me to him for a private interview which is considered a greater compliment than the public audience. We entered a large hall, and rang a large bell—if I may judge from the size of the handle. Nobody answering the bell, we walked about on our own account, as divers other gentlemen (mostly with their hats on, and their hands in their pockets) were doing, very leisurely.

Some of them had ladies with them to whom they were shewing the premises; others were lounging on the chairs and sofas; others, yawning and picking their teeth.

The greater part of this assemblage were rather asserting their supremacy than doing anything else; as they had no particular business there, that anybody knew of. A few were eyeing the moveables as if to make quite sure that the President (who is not popular) hadn't made away with any of the furniture, or sold the fixtures for his private benefit. . . .

We went up stairs into another chamber, where were the more favored visitors who were waiting for audiences. At sight of my conductor, a black in plain clothes and yellow slippers, who was moving noiselessly about, and whispering messages in the ears of the more impatient, made a sign of recognition and glided off to announce us. . . .

In five minutes' time, the black came back, and led us into an upper room—a kind of office—where, by the side of a hot stove, though it was a very hot day, sat the President—all alone; and close to him, a great spit box, which is an indispensable article of furniture here. . . .

The President got up, and said, "Is *this* Mr. Dickens?"—"Sir," returned Mr. Dickens—"it is." "I am astonished to see so young a man Sir," said the President. Mr. Dickens smiled, and thought of returning the compliment—but he didn't; for the President looked too worn and tired, to justify it. "I am happy to join with my fellow citizens in welcoming you, warmly, to this country," said the President. Mr. Dickens thanked him, and shook hands.

Then the other Mr. Dickens, the Secretary, asked the President to come to his house that night, which the President said he should be glad to do, but for the pressure of business, and measles.

Then the President and the two Mr. Dickenses sat and looked at each other until Mr. Dickens of London observed that no doubt the President's time was fully occupied, and he and the other Mr. Dickens had better go. Upon that they all rose up; and the President invited Mr. Dickens (of London) to come again, which he said he would. And that was the end of the conference.

From a March 12, 1842, letter to Albany Fonblanque, editor of the London Examiner.