

Dickens and ‘the Moving Age’

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On 9 June 1865 Charles Dickens had been returning from France on the tidal express which had left Paris at 7 am. He had taken the cross-channel ferry at Boulogne, and resumed the train journey at Folkestone at 2.38 pm on its way to Charing Cross. Work was being undertaken on the line between Staplehurst and Headcorn, on the bridge over the River Beult, and rails had been removed. The foreman in charge of the work had consulted the wrong timetable and was not expecting a train for another two hours. The train had been travelling at fifty miles per hour on a downward gradient, and the sight of the danger signal (a man waving a red flag some 500 yards from the site of the work) succeeded in slowing it to a speed of twenty to thirty mph. The train jumped the 42-foot gap, swerved off the track and broke in two. Seven carriages plunged into the river; the other remained poised over the gap. There were 110 passengers, of whom ten were killed and 14 badly injured. Dickens worked hard to tend the injured and dying, and wrote fully about his anger about the incompetence causing the accident. Dickens had been accompanied by Ellen Ternan, with whom he had been conducting a very close liaison since first meeting her in 1857 (they were frequent travellers to France together), and her mother.

Rail travel, in many ways, identifies the nineteenth century as a ‘moving age’ and could be, as here, a dangerous experience. We shall revisit it later. Incidentally, Charles Dickens died on the same date, 9th June, five years later, in 1870.

Dickens was born in Portsmouth in 1812, three years before the Battle of Waterloo brought to an end the Napoleonic Wars and established Great Britain as the leading nation in the world. Britain was the centre of a developing empire, extending across all continents, and the centre of a great trading system, increasingly stimulated by the process of change from a predominantly agrarian economy to a predominantly industrial one, which had been going on for the previous fifty years or so. With this process of change came social strains and stresses and changes to the way people lived their lives;

the development of great towns and cities in the midlands and north, a change in the location of wealth and its creation, and the need for the political and social structure to acknowledge these things, all meant that there was a ferment of change in Dickens's lifetime: it was a 'moving age' indeed.

The title for this talk comes from chapter 12 of Dickens's novel, *Bleak House*, published between May 1852 and September 1853. It is a mid-century novel, following soon after the Great Exhibition, and one which presents both a searching analysis and a powerful indictment of Victorian society. In lots of ways, it is Dickens's 'take' on the Great Exhibition, of which event with its immensely self-congratulatory stance, he deeply disapproved. Here is the paragraph in question:

'There are also ladies and gentlemen of another fashion, not so new but very elegant, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who have found out the perpetual stoppage. Who are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas. On whom even the Fine Arts, attending in powder and walking backward like the Lord Chamberlain, must array themselves in the milliners' and tailors' patterns of past generations, and be particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age.'

It is a brilliant paragraph, summarising many of the things Dickens found distasteful about social attitudes: indifference; complacency in any form, backward-looking, lack of earnestness (that great Victorian value); inability to respond; cultural philistinism . . .

Bleak House, widely regarded as one of Dickens's greatest achievements, is a novel of great immediacy, from its very opening in a fog-bound London. It is a picture of mid-Victorian England at the height of its power and potential, caught between forces for stagnation and for change. The faults in society are caused by an out-dated, hide-bound system like Chancery, self-serving and self-perpetuating, destroying those who become caught up in its toils. It is also a world governed by an aristocracy which is ossifying. As a result of these influences, there is great poverty and suffering, squalor and disease. Pitched against the stagnation are positive forces for change like medicine, the new police force, the new industrialists: there is energy as well as ossification, though some of the energy takes the form of misplaced philanthropic zeal and a neglect of the real and immediate problems in society. Alongside the social analysis runs a narrative about a personal search for identity.

It is true that we look to Dickens for a re-creation of the nineteenth century. Indeed,

our picture of life in that complex, energetic and high-achieving century often comes from works of fiction, and especially Dickens's, because he creates such a vivid and detailed contemporary world in his novels, and his other writings. We recall Walter Bagehot's description of him in a review in 1858 as writing as if he were 'a special correspondent for posterity', a writer who captures images of his age in words. Through Dickens's writings we are kept in contact with some of the crucial developments of the nineteenth century: political change, reform, the advent of railway travel, the Great Exhibition, the Crimean War, educational developments, and we touch the texture of daily life, particularly in areas like poverty, provision (or lack of it) for suffering, entertainment, the law, crime, prison, and the struggle for survival in an increasingly complex world. We are in particular, allowed to watch the capital city grow.

I propose today to look at some of the ways Dickens takes his own 'impress from the moving age' through his varied contacts with aspects of his age, but initially to return to perhaps the most evident way in which the nineteenth century was a 'moving age'; it was the age when railways developed.

Charles Dickens is often identified in the popular imagination as a man of the stagecoach world: those scenes on Christmas cards we call Dickensian, for example. He was, of course, born into a stagecoach world, in 1812, and he records the feeling, as a child travelling from Kent up to London, of being packed into the damp straw inside a coach, 'like game'. His early novels, like *Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* are stagecoach novels, with characters using that mode of transport. The mood created by these journeys at their best is captured here, from chapter 46 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the occasional smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses—all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head joggled to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue, and hearing all these sounds like dreamy music, lulling to the senses—and the slow waking up, and finding one's self staring out through the breezy curtain half-opened in the front, far up into the cold bright sky with its countless stars, and downward at the driver's lantern dancing on like its namesake Jack of the swamps and marshes, and sideways at the dark grim trees, and forward at the long bare road rising up, up, up, until it stopped abruptly at a sharp high ridge as if there were no more road, and all beyond

was sky.

But by the time he was eighteen, in 1830, the first piece of railway track was laid between Manchester and Liverpool, and the railway age had begun. When, in March–April of 1837, he with his wife and first child, took possession of their first family house at 48 Doughty Street in Bloomsbury, London, work was going on at nearby Euston on the first main line railway, from Birmingham, to be brought into the capital. Its first section, from Euston to Boxmoor was opened on 20th July 1837, a month after Victoria became queen, and the whole line was completed on 17th September 1838.

Dickens's letters of 1838 show us he was already travelling by train. Staying at Llangollen he wrote to Forster on 2nd November 1838 telling him to 'go straight to Liverpool by the first Birmingham train' (the Grand Junction Railway from Birmingham to Liverpool had been opened in July 1837). On 5th November he wrote from Liverpool to his wife that he would be returning to London with Forster and would arrive 'at the Euston Square Station of the Birmingham Railway.'

By the time of Dickens's death in 1870, most of the main line termini in London had been built. Liverpool Street, Blackfriars and Marylebone were the only ones still to come. Work on an Underground Railway in the capital had begun and been opened in 1863. Dickens was himself permanently established at Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester in Kent by this time, but had been commuting up to London from the conveniently nearby Higham Station for the previous ten years. He also became a frequent rail traveller in the course of his Reading Tours to all parts of this country and America in the 1850s and 60s. By 1870 the rail network in this country was well-established, and the changes it brought into being had altered people's lives for ever. Dickens spent his adult life living through those times and recording them.

Dickens was very much a man fascinated by technological progress and its potential for good. He often described the act of writing as 'getting up steam' and of 'blazing away' when the creative fit was on him—both industrial metaphors closely related to railways and steam. John Ruskin described Dickens as being of 'the steam whistle party', a man wedded to the progressive developments of the time. In a letter to his friend, Douglas Jerrold, from Cremona in Italy in November 1844, Dickens is strongly critical of the voices raised in objection to the building of a railway in Venice:

Instead of going down upon their knees, the drivellers, and thanking Heaven that they live in a time when Iron makes Roads instead of prison bars, and engines for driving screws into the skulls of innocent men.

More than any other technological development, railways characterise the Victorian Age and remain one of its greatest achievements, harnessing natural power and energy by man-made means in the cause of improvement and progress. Tennyson, wrote in *Locksley Hall* (written 1837–38, published 1842):

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.

Wrong, of course; he thought railway train wheels ran in grooves, instead of on flanges and rails.

The pace of life in the nineteenth century was changing fast. Think of walking or horse-riding as the pace of life from the middle ages up to the mid-nineteenth century. A good horse-drawn coach travelling on a well-made road in reasonable weather conditions could average a speed of 9 to 10 mph: movement as fast as people envisaged possible up to the 1830s. Between 1839 and 1880 railway travelling speed increased from 12 mph to 48 mph, averaging about 36 mph for much of the time. By the end of the great railway boom of the 1840s, over 5000 miles of track had been laid, and by 1889 this had increased to 13,000. The railway boom stimulated the economy, the iron and steel industry especially, and made it easier for goods to be transported. It gave employment opportunities, very important at a time when there was much poverty and suffering. The very real fear of revolution with the Chartist Movement and the 'Hungry Forties' (and the ever-present memory of the French Revolution high in the popular consciousness) was somewhat assuaged by the economic boost given by railway development. There was the opportunity for speculation, and fortunes could be made and just as easily lost. Gradually there came about the opportunity to live away from the area where you worked. The landscape was altered: travellers saw parts of the country they barely knew existed. Train travel demanded standardisation of time throughout the country, which happened from the 1880s.

All of this took some adjustment. Gentlemen, who had their own horse-drawn carriages, would unbridle the horses and have the carriages fixed to flat trolleys coupled to trains, and travel in them, rather than have to share carriages with other people. Guards locked carriage doors to prevent people getting out while the train was moving. Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, is reputed to have remarked to a railway official after his first journey, 'Not quite so fast next time, Mr Conductor, if you please.' Dickens has the wonderfully-garrulous Mrs Gamp describing the dangers of the shocks and excitement of railway travel for ladies in an interesting condition, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

‘I have heard of one young man, a guard upon a railway, only three year opened [. . .] as is godfather at this present time to six-and-twenty blessed little strangers, equally unexpected, and all on ’em named after the Ingeins as was the cause.’

Dickens gives Tony Weller, father of Sam, in *Pickwick Papers*, the opportunity to voice several objections to railway travel, from the perspective of a stage coachman, in this extract from *Master Humphrey’s Clock*:

‘It wos on the rail, (Samivel) [. . .] I wos a goin’ down to Birmingham by the rail, and I wos locked up in a close carriage vith a living widder. Alone we wos; the widder and me wos alone; and I believe it wos only because we WOS alone and there wos no clergyman in the conwayance, that that ’ere widder didn’t marry me afore ve reached the half-way station. Ven I think how she began a screaming as we wos a goin’ under them tunnels in the dark, —how she kept on a faintin’ and ketchin’ hold o’ me,—and how I tried to bust open the door as was tight-locked and perwented all escape—Ah! It was a awful thing, most awful!’

‘And as to the ingein,—a nasty, wheezin’, creakin’, gaspin’, puffin’, bustin’ monster, always out o’ breath, vith a shiny green-and-gold back, like a unpleasant beetle in that ’ere gas magnifier,—as to the ingein as is always a pourin’ out red-hot coals at night, and black smoke in the day, the sensiblest thing it does, in my opinion, is, ven there’s somethin’ in the vay, and it sets up that ’ere frightful scream vich seems to say, “Now here’s two hundred and forty passengers in the wery greatest extremity o’ danger, and here’s their two hundred and forty screams in vun!”’

Inevitably there were objections to the changes wrought by the railways. Dickens, always responsive to the tenor of the times, addresses the issue most fully in *Dombey and Son*. Published, as usual for Dickens, in serial instalments, it came out between October 1846 and April 1848, and it is the great novel of the Railway Age. It is a strikingly contemporary work, coming at a crucial point in Dickens’s career, and the novel in which he gives railways a major focus. In it he records social and physical change consequent upon railways, in describing the obliteration of Staggs’s Gardens, a London area usually associated with Camden Town, which Dickens knew from having lived there when the family moved to London when he was a child.

The increasing pace and speed of life was a colossal change. Mr Dombey, in chapter 20, undertakes a train journey from Euston to Birmingham. In 1841 this would have taken five hours, reducing to three hours by 1848, the year of the novel’s publication; today it takes just over two hours—or should. The other major adjustment to be made

was the unsettling effect of landscape change and the destruction of whole communities in order to make room for the railway to pass through. What is so special here, and so new in fiction, is the way Dickens captures the rhythms of the train as it sweeps through the countryside. The language bristles and crackles; the disorientation is exposed; the whirl and vision presented to us in the finest piece of early railway poetry I know. This is published in part seven of the novel, in April 1847, not yet ten years since this particular line opened.

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever flying from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever moving slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smoothes or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Breasting the wind and light, the shower and sunshine, away, and still away, it rolls and roars, fierce and rapid, smooth and certain, and great works and massive bridges crossing up above, fall like a beam of shadow an inch broad, upon the eye, and then are lost. Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small, and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again, and working on in such a storm of energy and perseverance, that amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward, until a ray of light upon the wet wall shows its surface flying past like a fierce stream, Away once more into the day, and through the day, with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath, sometimes pausing for a minute where a crowd of faces are, that in a minute more are not; sometimes lapping water greedily, and before the spout at which it drinks has ceased to drip upon the ground, shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance!

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance.

As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them.

It is also important to note the last part of the piece, as the train enters the midlands city. Here is a Birmingham industrial landscape Dombey, the capitalist from London whose wealth helped to create the enabling context for the railway boom, would not otherwise know, an industrial world of darkness and misery, a world into which the train has 'let the light of day.' This is again a typical feature of the age: the sources of wealth not known or acknowledged by those who exploit them.

Dickens was not only a traveller, or voyager, in this country and by train. He travelled overseas too.

Dickens visited America twice, once from 22 January to 7 June 1842, including crossing into Canada where he stayed for nearly a month, and once from 19 November 1867 to 22 April 1868, including a briefer visit to Canada. This visit was principally a public reading tour. There were three kinds of writing which emerged from the 1842 visit. Dickens maintained an extensive correspondence with friends at home during these visits and drew on these letters when he turned his experiences into published works, in *American Notes for General Circulation* in 1842 and in the chapters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* devoted to Martin and Mark Tapley's experiences during their visit to America. Dickens has Martin say 'I'll go to America' at the end of chapter 12.

He went with great enthusiasm; America was the new world, and it appealed to his radical sympathies:

'My notion is that in going to a New World one must for the time utterly forget, and put out of sight, the Old one and bring none of its customs or observance into the comparison—Or if you do compare remember how much brutality you may see (if you choose) in the common streets and public places of London'.

He was genuinely fascinated by America, its political achievements, and its physical grandeur. 'I cannot describe to you the glow into which I rise when I think of the wonders that await us, and all the interest I am sure I shall have in your mighty land', he wrote to the editor of the New York *Knickerbocker* magazine.

The North American continent was occupied principally by Canada, still a British possession, and by the United States, formerly a British possession. The United States had emerged as an independent country after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, a declaration which famously stated:

All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The final defeat of British forces took place at Yorktown in 1781 and the new country was recognised in 1783 by the Peace of Paris. These events had taken place some sixty-six years prior to Dickens's visit of 1842; a parallel for us might be sixty-six years ago: 1939 and the start of WW2; still resonant in our collective consciousness.

So here is a new country, speaking the same language and inheriting some of the attitudes of the old country, but asserting its youth and confidence, and the superiority of its institutions, over the outdated world of Europe.

There was, though, one major problem: slavery in the southern states of America. As Andrew Sanders puts it in his *Authors in Context* volume:

'It had been governed for the most part by prosperous landowners, farmers and urban tradesmen who believed in the broad principle of personal liberty enshrined in the laws and religious convictions that their forbears had brought with them across the Atlantic. The fact that slavery had not only survived the Revolution, but had increased as the southern United States expanded westwards, was the consequence of the constitutional insistence that the rights of the individual included the right to the unhindered possession of property. The glaring anomaly that that property might also be human, and be therefore denied rights, took time to sink in.' (page 61)

Britain, we recall, had abolished slavery throughout its empire in 1833.

There were political tensions between the United States and Britain in the 1830s and 1840s over issues like slavery, boundary disputes between the USA and Canada, and increasing economic rivalry with the development of American industry starting to threaten what had been traditionally British monopolies in manufactured goods. There was inevitable suspicion about a different form of government and still some resent-

ment at the revolt against the established order which the war of Independence had represented.

America, in its turn, was enthusiastic and excited about the visit of this literary superstar, who they applauded for his radical sentiments, his sympathy with the poor and downtrodden. He was met by crowds on the harbourside in Boston, there was balls in his honour, he was introduced to the President, he was fêted wherever he went. He wrote to John Forster about his reactions:

The American poor, the American factories, the institutions of all kinds— I have a book, already. There is no man in this town, or in this State of New England, who has not a blazing fire and a meat dinner every day of his life. A flaming sword in the air would not attract so much attention as a beggar in the streets. There are no charity uniforms, no wearisome repetition of the same dull ugly dress, in that blind school. All are attired after their own tastes, and every boy and girl has his or her individuality as distinct and unimpaired as you would find it in their own homes. At the theatres, all the ladies sit in the fronts of the boxes. The gallery are as quiet as the dress circle at dear Drury-lane. A man with seven heads would be no sight at all, compared with one who couldn't read and write.

Being a superstar brought its own difficulties, then as now, as here, to Forster again on 24th February 1842:

I have come at last, and it is time I did, to my life here, and intentions for the future. I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude. If I stay at home, the house becomes, with callers, like a fair. If I visit a public institution, with only one friend, the directors come down incontinently, waylay me in the yard, and address me in a long speech. I go to a party in the evening, and am so inclosed and hemmed about by people, stand where I will, that I am exhausted for want of air. I dine out, and have to talk about everything, to everybody. I go to church for quiet, and there is a violent rush to the neighbourhood of the pew I sit in, and the clergyman preaches at me. I take my seat in a railroad car, and the very conductor won't leave me alone. I get out at a station, and can't drink a glass of water, without having a hundred people looking down my throat when I open my mouth to swallow. Conceive what all this is! Then by every post, letters on letters arrive, all about nothing, and all demanding an immediate answer. This man is offended because I won't live in his house; and that man is thoroughly disgusted because I won't go out more than four times in one evening. I have no rest or peace, and am in a perpetual worry.

And to Daniel Maclise, on 22nd March 1842:

Imagine Kate and I—a kind of Queen and Albert—holding a Levee every day (proclaimed and placarded in newspapers) and receiving all who choose to come. Imagine—but you can't imagine, without seeing them—how now and then a republican boy, of surpassing and indescribable free and easiness comes in among the company, and keeping his cap upon his head, inspects me at his leisure. We had one the other day who remained two hours, and took no other refreshment during the whole time than an occasional pick at his nose, or survey of the street from the open window, whence he invited other boys to come up, and do the like. Imagine, when I landed from a steam boat in New York, in a dense crowd, some twenty or thirty people, screwing small dabs of fur out of the back of that costly great coat I bought in Regent Street! Imagine these public receptions occurring every day, and how I feel towards the people who come in, fresh, and full of speech and questioning, when I am quite tired out! Every railroad car is like a great omnibus. Whenever we come to a town station, the crowd surround it, let down all the windows, thrust in their heads, stare at me, and compare notes respecting my appearance, with as much coolness as if I were a Marble image. What do you think of that—as you would say, yourself.

Dickens's initial excitement and positive feeling towards America were soon to change, and there are several reasons for this. He took the opportunity of public platforms to campaign vigorously for an international copyright agreement. A new copyright act had been passed on 1 July 1842, after this visit. Prior to that, 'moral piracy' of an author's work was possible, reprinting their works in unauthorized versions. There was no legal prohibition of this, and Dickens wanted an international, or at least bi-national, reciprocal copyright agreement, in that case between USA and Britain. He found some aspects of American manners distasteful, particularly the habit of spitting in public, and he objected to the constant invasion of his privacy. The strongest outrage, however, came from his repulsion at the institution of slavery. The positive relationship between Dickens and America seemed to be irrevocably damaged by the time he returned home in June 1842.

To W C Macready 22nd March 1842:

This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination. I infinitely prefer a liberal Monarchy—even with its sickening accompaniments of Court Circulars, and Kings of Prussia—to such a Government as this. In every respect but that of National Education, the Country disappoints me. The more I think of its youth and strength, the poorer and more trifling in a thousand respects, it appears in my eyes. In everything

of which it has made a boast—excepting its education of the people, and its care for poor children—it sinks immeasurably below the level I had placed it upon. And England, even England, bad and faulty as the old land is, and miserable as millions of her people are, rises in the comparison.

When he visited America again, towards the end of his life, he noticed many things had changed. We remind ourselves that the American Civil War had taken place between his two visits: it lasted from 12 April 1861 to 9 April 1865. Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated in 1865.

Dickens was once more lionised and the public reading tour played to packed houses, but there were problems, over black market tickets for his readings, over his reputation for avarice and over American reactions against his separation from Catherine in 1858. He gave 32 reading performances between December 1867 and 20th April 1868, some of them one-day, some lasting for two, three, four or five days. It was a punishing schedule for a man who was not in the best of health and was especially troubled by American catarrh all through this winter. On 18 April 1868 he spoke at a banquet given in his honour by the New York Press Association at Delmonico's Restaurant. The balance was positive on this visit and seems to have established a continuing appreciation and genuine enthusiasm for the man and his works which lasts up to the present day.

Dickens made his first visit to France in 1837 and his last in 1868. His European travelling spans, therefore some 31 years, and includes some long periods of residence abroad, especially in Italy, during the 1840s, and some frequent shorter visits to the northern coast of France later in his life. There were about sixty channel crossings, and it was quite a perilous business. Staplehurst was an extreme case, but every journey was perilous, especially if, like Dickens, you were not a very good traveller. This is how he describes his first experience of crossing the channel in July 1837 in a letter home to Forster:

We arrived here in great state this morning—I very sick, and Missis very well [. . .].

We have arranged for a post coach to take us to Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp, and a hundred other places that I cannot recollect now and couldn't spell if I did. We went this afternoon in a barouche to some gardens where the people dance, and where they were footing it most heartily—especially the women who in their short petticoats and light caps look uncommonly agreeable. A gentleman in a blue surtout (coat) and silken Berlins (gloves) accompanied us from the Hotel, and acted as Curator (guide).

He even waltzed with a very smart lady (just to show us, condescendingly, how it ought to be done) and waltzed elegantly too. We rang for slippers after we came back, and it turned out that this gentleman was the 'Boots'. Isn't this French?

Like all his letters, it crackles with excitement and immediacy, as the new experiences crowd in on him.

In February 1847, he is still suffering from the dislocation and upset of travel: 'I never knew anything like the sickness and misery of it. And besides that, I really was alarmed; the waves ran so very high, and the fast boat, going at that speed through the water, shipped such enormous volumes of it.'

But, however, risky and alarming, it didn't stop him. He was—and it is a theme I want to return to—a man who loved danger and pushing himself to limits.

Travelling to Europe took place for various reasons. He took his growing family abroad for holidays, renting accommodation. The long stay in Italy, at the Palazzo Peschiere, near Genoa, is one case, as is their residence in Boulogne. He simply loaded the family and their required possessions all onto a travelling coach or diligence and off they went for months at a time, 'wherever his restless humour carried him', and 'restless' is the keyword for him in many ways. He later rented a smaller property in a village called Condette, near Boulogne, where he made frequent shorter trips later in his life, often accompanied, secretly, by Ellen Ternan. If the relationship between Dickens and Ellen Ternan was, as is often implied, more than platonic, he was certainly following typical social behaviour of the time in conducting the affair (if it was one) on the continent, which was perceived as a place where English moral standards did not apply, and there was, albeit temporarily, an opportunity to escape from stifling Victorianism. Dickens, for so many then and now, embodied Victorian family values, home and hearth, the respectable and successful father of a large family. Sometimes he travelled alone, sometimes with friends and colleagues, sometimes, especially as his career developed, for publicity and performance. When he was abroad for long stretches of time with his family, he would often make frequent trips back to London, for writing and for publishing purposes, most famously when he had completed *The Chimes* in 1844. He found it very difficult to write whilst away from London streets and city sights ("That magic lantern" he called London). Euro-commuting for business in its early stages!

What it shows us about the social life of the time is to do with the increase in travel opportunities. This is the time of Murray's *Guidebooks* to great European cities

and their art and architectural treasures; it is the time of Thomas Cook, whose travel agent business started in 1845, initially in Britain, but was soon to expand into tours of European sites by 1864. The prosperity of the English middle-class enabled them to expand their experience of foreign parts.

Whilst in Boulogne in 1854 Dickens saw military manoeuvres of troops to be sent to the Crimea. The Crimean War, between Russia and the western powers from 1854–56 was clearly an event which engaged Dickens's awareness of international affairs very deeply. He blamed the Emperor of Russia for the decline in the sales of his books, and responded to the privations of the soldiers by arranging to send them supplies of reading matter—his own books of course. He describes himself as being “full of mixed feelings about the war—admiration of our valiant men—burning desires to cut the Emperor of Russia's throat”. There is a wonderful sequence of letters in 1855 between Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts (of Coutts's Bank) about the design and construction of a machine to be sent to Scutari to assist the hospital, under Florence Nightingale's guidance, by drying bandages. He helped design it, organise its construction in kit form, sent a man from his staff at *Household Words* with it to assemble it.

Dickens's second travel book, *Pictures from Italy* (1846) gives his highly personal reaction to his Italian visit. He sees all the relics of the classical past, ‘a ruined world where the broken hourglass of time is but a heap of idle dust’. This serves to emphasise and reinforce his sense of English superiority in its own modern-day progress, but his identification of Britain as the centre of the greatest Empire of the present day, the workshop of the world, the modern day Rome, also carries an implied warning. Great empires pass away; here was Rome. . . . In all of his encounters with other nations the parallel with modern Britain is inevitably drawn, whether in travel books, journalism or novels, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, where he confronts that great Victorian terror, the French Revolution, and he reminds us that ‘The best of times, the worst of times’ was ‘so far like the present period’. His voyages of discovery emphasise his response to the moving age of nineteenth century Britain.

He is as an English protestant, highly critical of Roman Catholic practices and the ceremonies of Holy Week in Rome, which he calls just ‘a brilliant show’ and observes the appearance of the Pope on a balcony as a ‘doll (stretching) out its tiny arms’. His visit took place during a period of revolutionary ferment which was to culminate in the Risorgimento, but he studiously avoids it, other than to hope for progress.

Above all, the book is wonderfully written. He describes Venice, in a chapter called ‘An Italian Dream’. Later, in *Little Dorrit*, he was to return to Venice, calling

it a 'crowning unreality, where all the streets were paved with water'. But for classic Dickens, excitement, terror, fascination, energy, risk-taking, human observation, eye for the comic and the nightmare side by side, you cannot better his description of the ascent of Mount Vesuvius, where, against all advice, he goes right up to the crater and looks in:

from tingeing the top of the snow above us, with a band of light, and pouring it in a stream through the valley below, while we have been ascending in the dark, the moon soon lights the whole white mountain-side, and the broad sea down below, and tiny Naples in the distance, and every village in the country round. The whole prospect is in this lovely state, when we come upon the platform on the mountain-top—the region of Fire—an exhausted crater formed of great masses of gigantic cinders, like blocks of stone from some tremendous waterfall, burnt up; from every chink and crevice of which, hot, sulphurous smoke is pouring out: while, from another conical-shaped hill, the present crater, rising abruptly from this platform at the end, great sheets of fire are streaming forth: reddening the night with flame, blackening it with smoke, and spotting it with red-hot stones and cinders, that fly up into the air like feathers, and fall down like lead. What words can paint the gloom and grandeur of this scene!

The broken ground; the smoke; the sense of suffocation from the sulphur: the fear of falling down through the crevices in the yawning ground; the stopping, every now and then, for somebody who is missing in the dark (for the dense smoke now obscures the moon); the intolerable noise of the thirty; and the hoarse roaring of the mountain; make it a scene of such confusion, at the same time, that we reel again. But, dragging the ladies through it, and across another exhausted crater to the foot of the present Volcano, we approach close to it on the windy side, and then sit down among the hot ashes at its foot, and look up in silence; faintly estimating the action that is going on within, from its being full a hundred feet higher, at this minute, than it was six weeks ago.

There is something in the fire and roar, that generates an irresistible desire to get nearer to it. We cannot rest long, without starting off, two of us, on our hands and knees, accompanied by the head-guide, to climb to the brim of the flaming crater, and try to look in. Meanwhile, the thirty yell, as with one voice, that it is a dangerous proceeding, and call to us to come back; frightening the rest of the party out of their wits.

What with their noise, and what with the trembling of the thin crust of ground, that seems about to open underneath our feet and plunge us in the burning gulf below (which is the real danger, if there be any); and what with the flashing of the fire in our faces, and the shower of red-hot ashes that is raining down, and the choking smoke and sulphur; we may well feel giddy and irrational, like drunken men. But, we contrive to climb up to the brim, and look down, for a moment, into the Hell of boiling fire below. Then, we all three come rolling down; blackened, and singed, and scorched, and hot, and giddy: and each with his dress alight in half-a-dozen places.

Dickens on the edge of the volcano, looking in. In so many ways he was on the edge all the time, taking risks, putting himself under immense pressure to achieve.

Another way in which he took the measure of the 'moving age' of the nineteenth century, another voyage of discovery, was made through his journalism.

Having ended his brief period of formal education at fifteen, Dickens took a job as a solicitor's clerk, which he hated, and began learning shorthand according to the current system, Gurney's, in preparation for a career as a reporter. It was the first step in his pursuit of an ambition to become a financially-independent, professional writer. Gurney's preceded Pitman's which came into being in 1837. He describes it thus in *David Copperfield*:

'I [. . .] plunged into a sea of perplexity that brought me, in a few weeks, to the confines of distraction. The changes that were rung upon *dots*, which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different; the wonderful vagaries played by *circles*; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like *flies' legs*; the tremendous effects of a *curve* in the wrong place.'

Dickens was a self-taught (in record time of course) practitioner of shorthand. A brief period working on reporting the legal proceedings at Doctors' Commons ended in 1831 when he followed his father on to the staff of *The Mirror of Parliament*, a journal owned by his uncle John Henry Barrow. It reported Parliamentary proceedings, and was a more accurate record than Hansard, since it made use of direct, on-the-spot, reporting, rather than transcribing from other publications.

These were exciting times for Parliamentary activity: the debates leading to the Great Reform Act of 1832, and its associated social legislation, discussions over Catholic Emancipation, over the abolition of slave labour in the colonies and so on. Dickens rapidly became, according to a fellow journalist, 'universally considered the rapidest and most accurate shorthand reporter in the gallery', and he was often consulted on points of detail because the precision of young Mr Dickens's reporting was well-known. The work was seasonal, bringing in 15 guineas a week when he was working, and providing him with the time to embark on writing sketches of London life, which began to appear in print from 1833. In 1834 he began work on a more regular basis, though a lower salary, for the *Morning Chronicle*.

The whole topic of Dickens and Parliament or politics is a large one but a few points are relevant here for the way his outlook was formed. When reviewing this peri-

od of his early life in his largely autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*, in 1849/50, he describes himself like this:

I have come legally to man's estate. I have attained the dignity of twenty-one. But this is a sort of dignity that may be thrust upon one. Let me think what I have achieved.

I have tamed that savage stenographic mystery. I make a respectable income by it. I am in high repute for my accomplishment in all pertaining to the art, and am joined with eleven others in reporting the debates in Parliament for a Morning Newspaper. Night after night, I record predictions that never come to pass, professions that are never fulfilled, explanations that are only meant to mystify. I wallow in words. Britannia, that unfortunate female, is always before me, like a trussed fowl: skewered through and through with office-pens, and bound hand and foot with red tape. I am sufficiently behind the scenes to know the worth of political life. I am quite an Infidel about it, and shall never be converted.

Even as he was reporting the activities of Parliament, he was picking up the potential for comic observation and satirical point, in the sketches which were later to become *Sketches by Boz* and he began early to form unflattering opinions about the behaviour of Members of Parliament which crop up from time to time in his fiction. His experience of Parliament initiated a career-long series of satirical observations. In *Hard Times*, Mr Gradgrind becomes a MP (one of the 'national dustmen') attending the House of Commons ('the great national cinder-heap'). In *Bleak House* the politicians are so interchangeable one for another, that he lists them with names like Boodle, Coodle all the way down to Zoodle (or Buffy, Cuffy...). In *Our Mutual Friend*, attempts to get a character into Parliament are enthusiastically carried out because it is 'the best club in London'.

The building in which Dickens worked as a reporter was the old Houses of Parliament, which burnt down in 1834, as the result of a fire caused by the burning of the old exchequer tally sticks. Work on the present building began in 1837 and was completed in 1860. In 1855 the country was in the midst of great dissatisfaction with governmental incompetence over the handling of the Crimean War, something which he was to inveigh against in his novel, *Little Dorrit*.

For all his criticism of the workings of Parliament, reporting its proceedings was an excellent thing for his development as a writer. As well as working for *The Mirror of Parliament*, he wrote for *The True Sun*, and reported debates on the abolition of slavery and the passage of the great Reform Bill of 1832: the atmosphere must have been

electric. He travelled up and down the country, especially reporting on the proceedings of the first elections after the new reformed Parliament came into being, which provided him with the raw material for the Eatanswill election episode in *The Pickwick Papers*. He served the Whig (Liberal) *The Morning Chronicle* from 1834 to 1836, employed as a staff reporter at 5 guineas a week, and later in a speech to The Newspaper Press Fund in 1865, described the circumstances under which he functioned:

‘I have often transcribed for the printer from my shorthand notes, important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been to a young man severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern, in a post chaise and four, galloping through a wild country, all through the dead of night, at the then surprising rate of fifteen miles an hour. The very last time I was at Exeter, I strolled into the Castle Yard there to identify, for the amusement of a friend, the spot on which I once ‘took’, as we used to call it, an election speech of my noble friend Lord John Russell, in the midst of a lively fight maintained by all the vagabonds in that division of the county, and under such a pelting rain, that I remember two good-natured colleagues, who chanced to be at leisure, held a pocket-handkerchief over my notebook after the manner of a state canopy in an ecclesiastical procession [. . .]. I have been in my time, belated on miry by-roads, towards the small hours, in a wheelless carriage, with exhausted horses and drunken postboys, and have got back in time for publication’

He recalls elsewhere racing along in a coach at night, with a candle burning on the brim of his hat to give light to write by. The pace and energy and drive all characterise Dickens all the time. The range of experience was important to him: he saw politics in all its manifestations up and down the country: it sharpened his eye and added to the collection of observations he would later use in his fiction. He was committed to vivid accurate reporting and observation, and by means of his imagination could translate the ordinary into surreal comedy and tragedy. Peter Ackroyd, in his 1990 biography, *Dickens*, wrote:

‘he learnt how to produce copy to a deadline with a punctiliousness that would prove invaluable for his novels in later life but, more importantly, it is significant that the greatest novelist of the English language should have been trained first as a journalist and reporter. He was at once made aware of an audience which he had to address, and whose tastes he would need to satisfy, if he were to be taken seriously at all.’

By this time, he had already tried his hand at fiction, producing a piece called ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’, which he submitted, nervously, to *The Monthly Magazine* in December

1833. It was accepted and published, and it set in motion the series of Sketches about London and its life, brilliantly-observed and captured, which eventually came to be published under his pseudonym as *Sketches by Boz*, during the second half of the decade. They are a wonderful way in to Dickens, and to the early nineteenth century, for the perspective they give on the age.

It was the success of these sketches which tempted Dickens away from *The Morning Chronicle* in November 1836 to become editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*: Richard Bentley wanted to exploit the name 'Boz'. Although it provided him with a place to publish his novel *Oliver Twist*, he never felt he had adequate editorial control ('It was always Bentley's. . . never mine' he wrote), resigning from it in 1839. He tried a similar miscellany approach himself with *Master Humphrey's Clock* (1840–41) using it to publish the *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*: once again, the format didn't work for him. During the rest of this period he was writing for the Radical weekly paper *The Examiner*, which was sub-edited and later edited by his friend John Forster. He wrote over forty articles for the paper, revealing commitment to liberal reform, expressing aesthetic opinions through theatre reviews, and taking up social issues. But he was never other than an occasional—if powerful—contributor and wanted to be more of a direct influence on opinion. He attempted this by means of editorship of *The Daily News* in 1846, which was not successful: Dickens did not have, at that point, the skill or experience to manage and run a newspaper. It was William Howard Russell, famous for his reporting of the Crimean War, who later wrote that Dickens was 'the best reporter in London' but not good as a journalist because he lacked experience and knowledge.

That has to be set in perspective when one turns to the great success of his career in this form, the establishment and operation of his two journals, *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*, which became one of the main ways in which he engaged with his age and took his voyages into unknown areas.

Household Words was for Dickens aged 38 in 1850 something of the fulfilment of a dream. As we have seen, his whole career had been in journalism of some kind, and it was a craft he honed to perfection. Indeed, the fiction, which rocketed him to the peak of popular fame, had arisen out of that, and his 20th century descendant, also a novelist in her own right, Monica Dickens, described him as having "the soul of a journalist". After early years as 'the best reporter in London', then an editor for other people and their journals, he was at last able to establish his own, first in *Household Words* (1850–59) and then in its immediate successor, *All The Year Round*, from 1859 on.

Setting up his own weekly journal gave him the measure of editorial control he had long wanted. Now he was no longer dependent on other publishers for handling his works, though they did continue to do so: he was a profitable commodity. He could publish, as well as edit and write, and use the medium for his own purposes. He set up offices at 16 Wellington Street North, near Covent Garden, in London: a Spartan, businesslike set of rooms, but a place in central London where he could stay if he wished and where he could entertain guests as well as work. He gathered together a staff of very talented young men, and used a number of other established writers too, like Mrs Gaskell. The periodical was very strictly under Dickens's control: there were no bylines on the articles to identify the writers (though we do know their identities from the account books kept showing payments to contributors); the whole enterprise was advertised on the first page of every weekly issue as 'Conducted by Charles Dickens': usually enough to guarantee sales. It is Dickens's stance and attitudes which permeate every issue. His friend Douglas Jerrold called it not anonymous but 'mononymous': there was no doubt who was behind every word that was written.

The publication was designed to cover a wide variety of topics: literary, political, social, current events, poetry, reviews, biography, one-off fiction (he did not plan to include serials but later changed his view). It enabled him to put very high-class writing on the market, far higher quality work than in some contemporary journals, which often tended to reprint from longer works: this was original, engaging, varied, and it gave him a platform for his political and social views. *Household Words* dealt with topics of the day like sanitation and housing, poverty and education, 'process' articles on scientific and technological developments in layman's language, factory conditions and governmental inadequacy. It was a weekly journal of twenty-four pages, published on Wednesdays but bearing the date of the following Saturday. Each issue usually included six to ten items of original writing.

What was not engaging or varied was its appearance: every page in double columns of unrelieved print, no illustrations, no catchy headlines, over 22,000 words each week. Indeed it is a tribute to the stamina of the Victorian reading public when one examines their popular reading matter. It cost twopence an issue. It is difficult to get an equivalent cost today, but it has been suggested that multiplying by 100 gets somewhere close, so that's about £2.00. The leading article was always carefully chosen, was often by Dickens himself. When *Hard Times* was serialised it always had pride of place on the front page.

It was possible to buy for ninepence (just over 4p) month's issues bound up and a

half-year's issues for five shillings and sixpence (27 pence). *Hard Times* is in volume nine (example). The journal was very influential, and often quoted in newspapers and other works; it did what he wanted it to do: it helped to form opinions. He was aiming at a middle-class audience: hence the stress on *Household* values; he was taking an embattled stance on important issues: hence the quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry V*; the price of two pence per issue aimed it at a particular social bracket where he wanted his influence felt.

Dickens set out his manifesto in the first issue, 30th March 1850: 'A Preliminary Word'.

We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers. We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look. We seek to bring into innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time.

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide the day!) can never be extinguished. To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out: —to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding—is one main object of our Household Words.

In a letter to his friend and later biographer John Forster, on 7th October 1849, he had written that everything was to be "as amusing as possible, but all distinctly and boldly going to what *in one's own view ought to be the spirit of the people and the time.*" He has a clear social, moral and educational agenda to follow—and it is his own.

Dickens separated from his wife Catherine in May 1858. Characteristically he published a statement ('Personal' June 12, 1858) in *Household Words*, which he also wanted published in *Punch*, which was also printed by his printers, Bradbury and Evans. They refused. He decided to wind up the journal, no longer work with them,

and undertake the complete running of a replacement journal to be called *All The Year Round*. He was to have a 75% share, his sub-editor W H Wills 25%, so in very real terms, he was in control. He set up new offices, still in Wellington Street, and published the first issue of the new journal on April 30th 1859, with the opening episode of *A Tale of Two Cities* as its leading article. It was later to serialise *Great Expectations*. It followed the same editorial principles as its predecessor and indeed stressed the continuity by advertising the incorporation of *Household Words* on every title page (so no-one else could use it!). It was phenomenally successful, with circulation as high, at times as 300,000.

Of course there were new developments too. Dickens introduced, in January 1860, a series of articles with a central narrator-figure called *The Uncommercial Traveller*, working for the firm of Human Interest Brothers. This is final development of an idea he had written to Forster about on 7th October 1849 when contemplating setting up *Household Words*:

The original matter to be essays, reviews, letters, theatrical criticisms, &c, &c, as amusing as possible, but all distinctly and boldly going to what in one's own view ought to be the spirit of the people and the time. [. . .] Now to bind all this together, and to get a character established as it were which any of the writers may maintain without difficulty, I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, by sunlight, moonlight, starlight, firelight, candlelight, and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognisant of everything, and go everywhere, without the least difficulty. Which may be in the Theatre, the Palace, the House of Commons, the Prisons, the Unions, the Churches, on the Railroad, on the Sea, abroad and at home: a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature. I don't think it would do to call the paper THE SHADOW: but I want something tacked to that title, to express the notion of its being a cheerful, useful, and always welcome Shadow. I want to open the first number with this Shadow's account of himself and his family. I want to have all the correspondence addressed to him. I want him to issue his warnings from time to time, that he is going to fall on such and such a subject; or to expose such and such a piece of humbug; or that he may be expected shortly in such and such a place. I want the compiled part of the paper to express the idea of this Shadow's having been in libraries, and among the books referred to. I want him to loom as a fanciful thing all over London; and to get up a general notion of 'What will the Shadow say about this, I wonder? What will the Shadow say about that? Is the Shadow here?' and so forth. Do you understand? [. . .] I have an enormous difficulty in expressing what I mean, in this stage of the business; but I think the importance of the idea is, that once stated on paper, there is no difficulty in keeping it up. That it presents an odd, unsubstantial, whimsical, new thing: a sort of previously unthought-of Power going about.

This persona for Dickens himself deals with topics of the day close to Dickens's heart and created some of the finest examples of the periodical essay in the language: in them he reaches the summit of his achievement in this kind of writing: observant, reflective, with a sensitive touch on the times, he can also be satirical, comic, campaigning: all the moods we constantly find in him. He continued to edit until his death, and the journal continued under the editorship of his eldest son.

This extract comes from *On An Amateur Beat*, published 27th February 1869, and it characteristic Dickens on London, policing, and outrage at the suffering of children:

Walking faster [. . .] , I overturned a wretched little creature, who, clutching at the rags of a pair of trousers with one of its claws, and at its ragged hair with the other, pattered with bare feet over the muddy stones.

I stopped to raise and succour this poor weeping wretch, and fifty like it, but of both sexes, were about me in a moment, begging, tumbling, fighting, clamouring, yelling, shivering in their nakedness and hunger.

The piece of money I had put into the claw of the child I had over-turned was clawed out of it, and was again clawed out of that wolfish gripe, and again out of that, and soon I had no notion in what part of the obscene scuffle in the mud, of rags and legs and arms and dirt, the money might be.

In raising the child, I had drawn it aside out of the main thoroughfare, and this took place among some wooden hoardings and barriers and ruins of demolished buildings, hard by Temple Bar.

Unexpectedly, from among them emerged a genuine police-constable, before whom the dreadful brood dispersed in various directions, he making feints and darts in this direction and in that, and catching nothing.

When all were frightened away, he took off his hat, pulled out a handkerchief from it, wiped his heated brow, and restored the handkerchief and hat to their places, with the air of a man who had discharged a great moral duty,—as indeed he had, in doing what was set down for him.

I looked at him, and I looked about at the disorderly traces in the mud, and I thought of the drops of rain and the footprints of an extinct creature, hoary ages upon ages old, that geologists have identified on the face of a cliff; and this speculation came over me:

If this mud could petrify at this moment, and could lie concealed here for ten thousand years, I wonder whether the race of men then to be our successors on the earth could, from these or any marks, by the utmost force of the human intellect, unassisted by tradition, deduce such an astounding inference as the existence of a polished state of society that bore with the public savagery of neglected children in the streets of its capital city, and was proud of its power by sea and land, and never used its power to seize and save them!

Dickens's voyages through his own times show him responding with great awareness and sensitivity to the age, its achievements and its shortcomings. His energetic

response to enormous technological change, his reactions to Britain in the context of the wider world, and his excursions into the vast range of social questions offered and demanding answers, all show him as a man very much prepared to take his own 'impress from the moving age.'