

## The Pickwick Papers

THE NOVEL which was to make Charles Dickens immortal was initiated almost by chance. In February 1836, in the month of his twenty-fourth birthday, he had published his first book. His debut has been successful enough to warrant a visit two days later from a certain publisher, William Hall, who wanted to put a suggestion to the rising author. He called upon Dickens in his lodgings in Furnivals Inn and found a young man, to use another contemporary's description, with 'eyes wonderfully beaming with intellect and running over with humour and cheerfulness' and with an energy 'that seemed to tell so little of a student or writer of books, and so much of a man of action and business in the world'. And what did Dickens see? He saw the man who, two years before, had sold him over the counter a copy of the *Monthly Magazine* in which his first published story had appeared. The omens, then, were propitious.

Hall then proposed his idea. He wanted Dickens to write a story in monthly serial parts – or rather he wanted the young author to provide the commentary, or letterpress, for the illustrations of a certain Robert Seymour. Each monthly episode was to narrate the exploits of a group of Cockney sportsmen (a popular theme at the time) who were to be called the Nimrod Club. Dickens was asked to write some twelve thousand words each month, for which he would be paid approximately thirteen guineas. He accepted immediately, not least because he needed the money. He was about to get married, and to move into larger lodgings, and, as he told his fiancée, '... the emolument is too tempting to resist'. But that cannot have

been the only reason for the alacrity of his response: he had a shrewd notion of his own possibilities, just as he had an instinctive sense of his own destiny, and it is hard not to believe he knew that at last he was coming into his own. There comes a moment in the life of any young writer when, suddenly, everything is changed; Dickens realised that moment had arrived.

Certainly he was confident enough to promise to deliver the first episode at the beginning of March, only three weeks away, and the second at the end of the same month – and this despite the fact that he was also writing plays, sketches, and working full-time as a parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. Indeed his self-confidence was such that, even before he began, he decided drastically to change the scope and nature of the project: he told his publisher that he had decided to range more widely than their original idea and would not, in any case, work directly from Seymour's drawings. He declared, instead, that the illustrator should take subjects from the text itself: it was Dickens, after all, who would decide the characters and the story of this new venture. Throughout his career, in fact, he never played a subsidiary role towards anyone. He insisted always on being preeminent.

After he had successfully asserted himself he was ready to begin but, first, he needed a title and a hero. He thought of the name of a coaching proprietor from Bath which he had seen on his frequent reporting excursions for the *Morning Chronicle* – that name was Moses Pickwick, and so *The Pickwick Papers* was born. Dickens sat down at his desk, on 18 February 1836, and wrote 'The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity . . .' It was the first morning of *The Pickwick Papers*, and the first morning of what we can without exaggeration term Dickens's new life. He introduced Mr Pickwick and the associates of his club, and almost at once thought of Mr Jingle, the first and still one of the funniest of his comic creations – Mr Jingle whose 'air of jaunty impudence and perfect

self-possession' so attracted Dickens's warmest sympathy and approbation. By the time he had introduced this gentleman, in the second chapter, he had also brought his narrative to Rochester – the site of his own happy childhood before he was removed to London and the blacking factory. Everything was coming together in a story which would associate, in miraculous combination, his own history and temperament with those of his age.

He was working quickly because of his own 'perfect self-possession'. *The Pickwick Papers* had been commissioned as a result of the reputation he had acquired for his previous stories and sketches, and there is no doubt that he saw this latest work as an extension of his occasional journalism and fiction. So he worked on instinctively, happily, almost unself-consciously, enlarging upon the stray associations and ideas which had first occurred to him, fashioning a firm narrative from the threads of his original nebulous design. It was not yet quite a novel, but it was already the most sustained and comprehensive work he had attempted. In fact he was buoyed up by all the life around him now – he was married at the beginning of April and allowed himself an unusual break from his work to make way for his honeymoon – until an unexpected eventuality seemed about to ruin everything. His illustrator, Robert Seymour, shot himself.

Without an illustrator there could be no monthly series – and, without a monthly series, perhaps no more Dickens . . . So a desperate search was undertaken for a replacement. Robert Buss was chosen for a few weeks and then abruptly dismissed. And then the author found his true companion – Hablot Knight Browne, a young man of shy demeanour and quiet manners, an unassuming artist who could be relied upon to accede to Dickens's demands in almost every particular. He seemed the ideal choice, and indeed over the next thirty years he proved to be precisely that – as 'Phiz' (the name he chose to complement Dickens's pseudonym, 'Boz'), he was to illustrate most of Dickens's novels and to lend them that

particular visual flavour which has always been part of their appeal.

It was in these spring and summer months of 1836, then, that we see the first outlines of the author who was to dominate the English novel. He knew that this was the work for which he was destined, and his energy and exuberance (not to mention his inventiveness) were such that, in this same period, while he was still working as a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*, he committed himself to five more books as well as two stage plays. The manuscript of *The Pickwick Papers* tells its own story: written in a clear, confident, large hand it has few corrections or second thoughts. It flows on magnificently, as the adventures of Mr Pickwick move on through Dingley Dell and Eatanswill and Bath. If there is one remarkable characteristic of the novel, it is that energy, that momentum, so much expressing the vitality of a young man who walked gladly towards his fame.

He was engaged upon quite a new thing in literature although, as is often the case, very few seemed to notice that fact at the time. For although there was a tradition of publishing old or established novels in monthly parts, this was the first time that a new work had been issued in such a manner. The novelty of the format is reflected also in the novelty of the enterprise: it was not a novel in the familiar three-volume style, and it certainly was not occasional journalism. It was a new and intriguing hybrid, and the fact that Dickens did not feel himself to be in any sense oppressed by the weight of literary tradition actually liberated his genius: he was not writing 'up to' any particular model and felt free to experiment, invent, or modify as he went along. He started to include short stories (generally of a horrific nature) within the narrative, and he introduced topical detail – the latest trial, and the latest scientific invention, were both exploited as part of his design. That is why *The Pickwick Papers* is filled with the spirit of the age, as if all the energy and optimism of those first decades of the nineteenth century had infused it with life. And yet, as

we shall see, the life is also that of Charles Dickens – who, as he progressed with the narrative, began to discover precisely what he was capable of. Just as a character like Mr Pickwick is enlarged and refined as the book proceeds, so that he ceases to be a mere object of fun and becomes something like a figure of universal benevolence, so Dickens's own sense of his powers is extended and enlarged.

His confidence grew, of course, when he began to realise the extent of his success. The printing of the first number was something close to four hundred copies: by the time of the last, it had reached forty thousand. The popularity of the serial (for this was how it seemed to its first audience) could be measured from the fourth number – a number, perhaps coincidentally, which first introduced Sam Weller and which first contained the illustrations of Hablot Browne. The appearance of Sam Weller was, in the short term, the more important of the two fresh aspects of the novel because Weller, with his Cockney wit and the sometimes arch peremptoriness of his manner, brought a new range of humour into English writing. There had been elements of it on the stage before, in the work of such impersonators as Charles Mathews (whom Dickens always admired), but it had never been employed on quite this scale and with this elaboration. It can be said with some justice that Dickens recreated the urban world for a new urban readership.

And, as a result, what a success it turned out to be: *The Pickwick Papers*, according to one contemporary, '... secured far more attention than was given to the ordinary politics of the day'. Fashionable doctors read it in their carriages, on their journeys between patients, and judges read it on the bench as jurors deliberated: the less affluent admirers of Dickens's work would press up against the booksellers' windows in order to see the latest instalment. In 1840 the name 'Pickwick' was found inscribed upon one of the great pyramids, and there is the famous story of the dying man who exclaimed, 'Well, thank God, Pickwick will be out in ten days, anyway.' Soon manufacturers put on sale the Pickwick cigar,

the Pickwick coat, the Pickwick hat. It was read by upper-class young ladies in drawing rooms, and by middle-class families in parlours: an early biographer of Dickens remembered visiting a locksmith in Liverpool and found him reading Pickwick '... to an audience of twenty persons, literally, men, women and children' who could not possibly have afforded the shilling for each monthly part. So these monthly parts were finding their way everywhere – it was part of Dickens's genius to ride the tide of his times, and it is not simply accident that he was able to inspire and amuse a truly national audience in an epoch when new methods of transportation and distribution meant that this national audience could be reached for the first time.

And yet why was it that *The Pickwick Papers* achieved such national renown, and seemed so signally to entertain and delight the nation? There was the novelty of the enterprise, of course, and the fact that it seemed to contain within its pages the moving spirit of the age itself. And there was also its wonderful and ubiquitous comedy, a comedy in which, characteristically, disaster is averted at the last moment: it was the comedy of the pantomime, which Dickens had loved as a child, but it had never before become the animating principle of a novel. It is also an enduring comedy: the comedy of Dodson and Fogg, of Serjeant Buzfuz, of Mrs Bardell, of the Fat Boy, of Bob Sawyer and Augustus Snodgrass, let alone that of Sam Weller and Alfred Jingle; this novel is as funny now as it was to our ancestors. Its characters are the first inhabitants of Dickens's comic kingdom, a gallery of creations which has never been surpassed or even equalled.

But that comedy was also implicated in a larger theme, for there is in the pilgrimage of Mr Pickwick some echo of that myth of innocence and peace, of ease and reconciliation, which is one of the enduring features of Western literature. Yet that mood of fullness and reconciliation could not help but have a specific relevance also, since in the very pattern and design of the narrative there was a strong and emphatic

yearning for the reconciliation of classes, for the reconciliation of families, for the nation itself to be characterised by union and brotherhood. These themes – so timely in an age when the ‘condition of England question’ was about to become of paramount concern and when industrialism was provoking its own forms of unrest – were couched within a narrative that also seemed to exemplify all of the energy and optimism of the early Victorian period: not just its vitality but its extravagance and its theatricality, its belief in progress and the possibility of change, its triumph over the past.

And yet none of this would have been of any account were it not for the strange alchemy of Dickens’s genius. He recreated himself in *The Pickwick Papers* just as the age itself was recreated within his own life, for all the energy and optimism were also Dickens’s characteristics at this time of great progress and creativity in his own career. He stood in symbolic relationship to his time, not least because the very vitality of his prose marked his own rise out of difficult circumstances and his triumph over his own past. In the pages of the novel itself there are echoes and intimations of his unhappy childhood – the scenes in the debtors’ prison can be taken as a reflection of his visits to the Marshalsea Prison where his father was incarcerated for debt, and the memories of Lant Street in the novel are Dickens’s own memories of the time when he took lodgings there to be close to his imprisoned family. There are other associations, too: his account of the clerks in the legal offices of London are a direct link to his experience as just such a clerk in just such an office. So Dickens’s life is mirrored here, too, but within a narrative that triumphs over his own frustrated childhood just as surely as Pickwick himself triumphs over all the tribulations and defeats which at one stage seemed to hem him round. And, in that collaboration of author and hero, we see the nation itself: in Dickens’s imagination, and no doubt in the imagination of his readers, is a story moving forward ineluctably to a time of fullness and prosperity. Thus a great novel is created.

It was in recent years fashionable to decry *The Pickwick Papers*, at least in comparison with such triumphs of Dickens’s later style as *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*: this in turn neatly reversed the common Victorian opinion that all of Dickens’s later novels represented his ‘dotage’ and that his purest spirit – what used to be called the spirit of his ‘fun’ – is to be found *in excelsis* in *Pickwick*. There is a partial truth in both attitudes – certainly *The Pickwick Papers* marks the first dominant stage of Dickens’s achievement, and as a ‘picaresque’ novel it was not surpassed by anything which he subsequently wrote. It represents a triumph of the comic spirit and, even if it is not as carefully constructed or as elaborately plotted as his later novels, it has a warmth and vivacity which the passage of time will never dim. It is like a shout of laughter, ringing forever in our ears.