

*American Notes for General Circulation &
Pictures from Italy*

IT IS often assumed that Charles Dickens, being so close and even obsessive a chronicler of London life, never willingly left the bounds of that city. He may have been a Londoner *in excelsis*, as some contemporary observers thought, but he came to hate the place itself and he was in any case always an enthusiastic and indefatigable traveller. In the last years of his life, for example, he spent almost as much time in France as he did in England. He even produced these two volumes of travel writing (there were also incidental sketches which appeared occasionally in his own periodicals), both of them distinctive and both of them imbued with his genius.

American Notes was started by Dickens within two weeks of his return from the United States, in June 1842, for there is a sense in which he had travelled to that country simply in order that he could write about it. No doubt he remembered Sam Weller's advice to Mr Pickwick: "... let him come back and write a book about the 'Merrikins as'll pay all his expenses and more, if he blows 'em up enough.'" Certainly Dickens felt he had every reason to 'blow 'em up' on his return, and Mary Shelley told a friend after meeting him in this period that 'Charles Dickens has just come home in a state of violent dislike of the Americans – and means to devour them in his next work – he says they are so frightfully dishonest'.

Yet it had all started so well. He had travelled by steamship across the Atlantic at the beginning of the year, together with

his wife and his wife's maid, prepared for six months in a country to which he already had a genuine attachment. He was, after all, himself almost an epitome of the New World – a young man of modest origins who had thrust his way forward by his own efforts and who was by instinct a radical. What could the New World do but welcome such a novelist in return? Indeed he already had some advance knowledge of his renown there; his books sold almost as many copies in the United States as they did in England (although of course, without the benefit of copyright, bearing no royalties) and we have seen the anxiety with which the American public waited to hear the fate of Little Nell. Such was the popularity of Charles Dickens, still only in his thirtieth year.

In fact his first weeks in the United States were spent in a condition of genuine excitement and enthusiasm. 'How can I give you the faintest notion of my reception here,' he wrote to his friend, John Forster, 'of the crowds that pour in and out the whole day; of the people that line the streets when I go out; of the cheering when I went to the theatre; of the copies of verses, letters of congratulation, welcomes of all kinds, balls, dinners, assemblies without end?' And indeed he was not, for once, exaggerating; the welcome was quite as effusive as he described it here, and for a young man who had been accustomed only to the milder and less vociferous attentions of his fellow-countrymen it came as a gigantic, overwhelming experience. For the first time in his life he truly understood the extent of his fame, of what he would call on another occasion his 'Power'. But then it all began to sour; when he started to make speeches demanding the establishment of some copyright agreement between England and the United States – in other words, when he started asking to be paid for the sale of his books – the applause died down. Where once the press had hailed him as the conquering hero, they now turned upon him and accused him of being both mercenary and hypocritical. Just as he had never experienced such a welcome, so he had never suffered such savage assaults upon his

character and reputation. 'I vow to Heaven,' he wrote to an American friend, 'that the scorn and indignation I have felt under this unmanly and ungenerous treatment has been to me an amount of agony such as I never experienced since my birth.' Strong words, but again no less than the truth.

Yet he was never a person to break off what he had once begun and so, having, as it were, wilted in the glare of publicity, he and his wife decided to spend their last months in the country travelling as privately as possible. Of course it was not always easy to do so – in most of the cities and towns he visited he was given something close to a civic welcome or 'Levee' – but at least he and his party were able to travel over large sections of the country. They visited Boston, New York, New Haven, Washington, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, Harrisburgh, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Columbus, forever moving onwards, Dickens all the time making observations and notes which he characteristically put into the letters he was constantly sending back to his friends in England.

These letters in fact provided a great deal of information which he used in *American Notes* itself and, when he and his wife eventually returned to England in the early summer, he was fully prepared to begin writing his book at once: he had even brought back newspapers and magazines to assist him in assembling all the information he thought he would require for a proper survey of America and its customs. He did not intend to write an account of his own reception in America, in other words, and he excised almost all the references to himself which had occurred in his correspondence. *American Notes* is a much more objective and sometimes almost impersonal record; its narrative is more elaborate and more artful than anything he had written in confidence to his friends, with a kind of dispassionate sprightliness which remains its dominant note. This travel book also differs markedly, in tone and substance, from the account of America which Dickens was later to include within the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The novel provides a darker, more condensed and more deliber-

ately thematic description of America and its inhabitants: the paler shades of reality have been repainted in Dickens's native chiaroscuro whereas in this account he is happy to provide a much more conventional mid-nineteenth-century journalistic narrative. In *American Notes* his characters rarely speak; in *Martin Chuzzlewit* they do nothing but speak. In *American Notes* Dickens's own opinions and reflections tend to brighten what is on occasions a sombre narrative; in *Martin Chuzzlewit* it is the action and speech of his protagonists which perform that service.

In any case *American Notes* is primarily concerned with what might be described as the public institutions of American life – in particular with the prisons, the workhouses and the asylums. The first extended description in this book is of the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind in Boston (in his letters which account for this period of his stay in America, he was primarily interested in his own reception), but this is not to suggest that his prose lacks interest or even vivacity. The fact is that Dickens was fascinated, almost obsessed, by such places; and one can feel throughout *American Notes* the extraordinary intensity of that interest. When he visits an asylum for mad women (which in his description might just as well have been filled by all the extraordinary females of his own fiction) he notes that the true 'danger' lay in their songs turning '... into a screech or howl' which is, on the face of it, an extraordinary remark to make. Then there is his constant preoccupation with the details of prisons and of punishment. As he says in the course of his American observations, a jail should really be 'a place of ignominious punishment and endurance' and yet even so he cannot resist sympathetically experiencing the thrill of fear when he encounters those unfortunate inmates who suffered under the 'separate system' (more or less of solitary confinement) in Philadelphia: 'I never in my life was more affected by anything which was not strictly my own grief, than I was by this sight,' he wrote in one of his many letters which complement the narrative itself.

His 'objective' account is always being subdued by his own sharp responses; so, when he visited a factory at Lowell, he praised the workers there for being clean and neat: '... I like to see the humbler classes of society careful of their dress and appearance, and even, if they please, decorated with such little trinkets as come within the compass of their means...' There were times in America when Dickens was genuinely moved and delighted by the improvements in public institutions and in the general condition of public welfare; he despised the general 'smartness' of the people and the inordinate concern with business but, in social matters at least, the country seemed to him to be ahead of England. In his comments on the benevolent paternalism of the factory system as well as on the generally humane treatment of the insane, Dickens was signalling the precise direction in which he thought his own country ought to move. And yet there is another more mournful, and more private, tone beneath his observations – in *American Notes*, as in his fiction, he is concerned with the outcasts, the oppressed and the maimed. He is fascinated by the solid power of the state at the same time as he is obsessed by those upon whom that state power encroaches most grievously.

American Notes was his first extensive work of non-fiction, and of course it cannot help but reflect all the preoccupations and interests which emerge in much more substantial form within his own fiction. It cannot help but also reflect the man himself, for he emerges here as punctilious, watchful, nervously high-spirited while remaining extremely susceptible to atmosphere: whenever he appears in his own pages the narrative takes on a melodramatic, fiery and even pantomimic life. It reflects a peculiarity of his temperament also that, at the end of this book, after he has expatiated on the evils of slavery and the horrors of the American press, he can suddenly insert a quite redundant but humorous anecdote about a bootmaker. Yet this was how Dickens's imagination worked, moving effortlessly from one level to another, combining the most bitter

polemic with the most farcical comedy. And that in the end is the true significance of *American Notes*: as an account of American life it may be partial and even on occasions wrong-headed (certainly Americans at the time thought as much), but as a record of Dickens's consciousness and behaviour it has a profound human interest. Here is the man standing before us, with all his prejudice, fear and wild hilarity.

Pictures from Italy was also an account of his travels, largely taken from the letters which he had written to his friends at the time, but it is quite different in tone and spirit from *American Notes*. In the later volume he was returning to an old world, not travelling through the New. He and his family had moved to Genoa in the summer of 1844, and eventually they took up residence in the Palazzo Peschiere on a hill overlooking the old city. It was this old city that in fact he came to love, and in his account of his Italian sojourn Dickens is clearly fascinated by the age and the decay, the grotesquerie and the darkness. He loved ruins, and crumbling walls, and cracked pavements, and there are times in his account when the remains of the Italian past take on an almost theatrical life – as if he were remembering the backdrops to all the Italian burlettas and melodramas he had seen in the London theatres.

But even while he was ensconced in Genoa he could not stay still. Not content with his fifteen-mile walks in the rain, or his perambulations along the narrow streets and alleys of the old city, he had to keep on moving. In fact he made two extended journeys through Italy during the year he and his family stayed in that country, and one of the essential characteristics of *Pictures from Italy* is its sense of constant motion and hurry. Parma. Venice. Bologna. Ferrara. Mantua. Milan. And then, on a later journey (with all of his family in attendance) he travelled on to Pisa. Rome. Capua. Naples. Pompeii. Florence. It was noticeable in his account of his American travels how interested Dickens was in the various forms of transport, as if they represented some objective equivalent of his own passion for speed and forward progress; the same

spirit is alive in *Pictures from Italy* also for, as Dickens said in a letter written while he was on the road, 'My only comfort is, in Motion . . .'

A similar atmosphere envelops his interest in buildings, and people, and paintings, and 'sights' in general: he had what his friend, Daniel Maclise, called a 'clutching' eye: he received his impressions straight away, and then was in a desperate hurry to move on to the next thing, and the next. This of course accounts for his interest in crowds, in carnivals, and in festivals of all kinds where the eye is continually being besieged by novelties and new sensations. That is why, in his descriptions of Italian life, he saw only the surfaces of things. The Catholic Church, for example, became for him no more than a parade of mummers and he seemed to have no interest in the history or traditions of that faith. He is always best at seeing things in passing, landscapes and sights flashing across him in quick succession. There are wonderful set-pieces, like his disquisition on Venice or his account of an execution in Rome, but to a large extent he eschews even the kind of analysis he was prepared to make in *American Notes*. In that earlier volume he had significant questions to raise about the nature of public institutions and serious points to make about the penal system of that country; but there is not the same theoretical or polemical edge to *Pictures from Italy*. He is not now concerned with gaols, or with asylums, or with the press, but with gloomy façades and absurd religious rites. In a sense he turns the Italian landscape into the material from one of his novels, because of its ' . . . bewildering phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream, and all the pain and all the pleasure of an extravagant reality!' It provides just a colourful panorama, against which the quick shape of Charles Dickens can be seen to move. Indeed, in certain respects, *Pictures from Italy* is most interesting for the light which it throws upon Dickens himself – with his delight in novelty, his fierce joy in contrast, and his constant untiring energy. His was a visual, emphatic imagination, always moving onward; in these pages one re-

ceives almost a physical sense of that movement, as if he were striding through a thoroughfare. *Pictures from Italy* may have been his journey into the past, just as *American Notes* was his journey into the future, but both contain at least the sparks of Charles Dickens's genius as he confronted the world.