

Charles Dickens in England

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In the early spring of 1990, when I landed on that homeground of English literature, my heart beat with expectation; full of dreams and determination to see or touch whatever would interest me. My primary concern was nineteenth century literature, especially the subjects of Thackeray, Dickens and some others. Having completed my preliminary study of those authors, I set off on a literary journey and encountered *en route* many interesting things, books, and people associated with my theme. I am now almost tempted to write about all those happy experiences and to show how beneficial, how valuable they must be both to my study and life in future. I will, however, limit myself here to one subject only — 'Charles Dickens in England', and leave the others deep in my heart, for the time being at least.

Perhaps I can begin with some references to the Dickens House in Doughty Street, London. Dickens moved to this house in the spring of 1837 with his wife Catherine and their little baby Charles, only a few weeks old. Dickens's younger brother Fred was also with them, and Catherine's pretty sister Mary Hogarth was an occasional and welcome visitor.

Dickens was then engaged in working on the serialisation of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, as well as some theatrical pieces. Day after day, night after night, he spent extremely busy hours as a young author on the one hand, as a home-loving husband and father on the other.

Dickens, however, could well manage his densely scheduled days and nights with his tremendous energy, with his robust

spirit and bright sense of humour, presumably inherited from his father. He rather seemed to enjoy pitting his inner powers against any hardship around him. He might have felt something burning and boiling within himself, and that he was continually moved to test his own ability against the world without. You can see, or rather feel at the Dickens House how he fought, and how he enjoyed himself in the middle of his early dazzling fame. He, after all, never ceased to endeavour to tackle the demands of both his public and private life.

At the front of the Dickens House, facing the street, is the dining room where scores of interesting exhibits are displayed in the glass cases: a walking stick, a quill pen, and Dickens's engagement ring curiously like the one David Copperfield gave his wife Dora. But even more impressive objects can be found in the adjoining room at the back. It is a smaller but cosy room, overlooking the garden, and somehow reminds you of the young author's everyday life, sitting comfortably with his family or with some close friends. Two examples of the blacking bottles in Warren's Factory are exhibited here; an emblem of Dickens's bitter experience in his earlier life, and probably a secret springboard for such energetic literary productions during his fairly short life.

Here is also a dark brown desk at which the fifteen or sixteen year old Dickens worked as a junior clerk in Gray's Inn before he made his appearance in the world of journalism. And here is a frame of a window taken out from the attic of the Camden Town lodgings, which again shows some trace of his dark, unhappy days. Apart from these, on the wall is a pretty sketch of young Fanny, Dickens's sister and a singer of some fame in those days. You can also find a charming sketch of Mrs. Dickens as a young wife along with another picture of her as a stout matron in her sixties.

Descending the stairs, looking at the notable sketches of

various scenes from Dickens's novels on the walls, you now reach the besement. The first object noticeable here is a sturdy iron grill fixed on the wall of the passage. This is believed to have been transferred from the Marshalsea Prison where Dickens's family was once kept for debt. The room on the left now serves as a library, and to the right is the wash house, and then the wine cellar in the rear. Take a glimpse at these parts of the House, and then again go up the stairs, passing through the entrance hall, to the first floor where you will face two rooms.

One is the drawing room, and the other is Dickens's study. Around the walls of the drawing room there are some of Hogarth's prints admired by Dickens during his residence here. This room is reconstructed and newly furnished following documentary evidence of the original *décor*, and some of the furniture, including an arm chair, a large rectangular table and a rosewood cottage piano, belonged to Dickens at this period.

In Dickens's study, the well-known engraving of 'The Empty Chair' by his last illustrator, Sir Luke Fildes, can be noticed. This was originally drawn in the Swiss Chalet at Gad's Hill on the day of Dickens's death, and the chair itself, copied or genuine, can be now found in three different places. One of them is placed in the spectacular study of "Bleak House" at Broadstairs, overlooking a serene stretch of the North Sea. 'The Empty Chair', anyhow, conveys a deep sorrow, a feeling of loss, and perhaps *Vanitus Vanitatum* above all, after such tremendous activities throughout one's life.

Another well-known piece is hung above the fireplace; the unfinished painting 'Dickens's Dream' by R. W. Buss. Dickens is here sitting in the chair, not 'empty' this time, and what a deep meditation, what a whirl of sounds and shapes in his dream! Here one can almost see the very essence of the Dickens world; the incessant repetition of his love and conflict,

joy and depression, fortune and misery.

The Suzannet Rooms are on the second floor, containing two rooms, Dickens's bedroom and the dressing room. The rooms are named after Comte Alain de Suzannet, a passionate collector of Dickensiana and a munificent patron to the Dickens House. He presented numerous items to the House and after his death, his wife followed the Comte's wish with the same fervent generosity.

Among these treasures, some of the most interesting to me are Dickens's reading copies with many underlinings and stage-directions, and a page of the autograph manuscript of *The Pickwick Papers*. The former is the emblem of his booming career over the last twelve years of his life, and the latter that of his earliest. The comprehensive catalogue of the Suzannet Gift with the most detailed descriptions of each item was edited by Professor Michael Slater, which is very helpful in understanding the nature of the Gift.

At the back of the second floor, on the right of the Suzannet Rooms there is a small, quiet room, on the door of which are rather startling words: 'Mary Hogarth died here.'

On the evening of May 6th 1837, Dickens went to St. James Theatre to see his own farce performed. His wife and Mary were with him, and Dickens was almost intoxicated by a feeling of happiness. He was happy with his work, with his family, with his recent success in life as a whole. He had gained tremendous popularity by publishing *The Pickwick Papers*, and then *Oliver Twist*. Everybody in town seemed to pay attention to this young author, and nothing seemed to him impossible to attain.

They went home late in the evening after the play, and relaxed together in the living room of the Doughty Street residence. After a short while Mary stood up and left the couple alone, bidding good-night to both.

Then, suddenly something awful happened. In her bedroom upstairs, Mary fainted by the bedstead before changing her clothes. On hearing a strange cry, Dickens and other family rushed into the room, and found Mary there lying on the floor.

A doctor was sent for, every possible treatment was tried, but all in vain. The morning came; Mary once slightly opened her eyes, murmured some words, closed her eyes again and never opened them any more. Mary died in Dickens's arms at three in the afternoon. She died of heart disease, so the medical man said.

Mary was then only seventeen years old, and how she had been loved by Dickens, how such an early death left him in an abyss of incurable sorrow, is not difficult to imagine. Here are some lines of an elegy by Dickens. This appeared in the August issue of *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1837, which was about three months after Mary's death:

I stood by a young girl's grave last night,
Beautiful, innocent, pure, and bright,
Who, in the bloom of her summer's pride,
And all its loveliness, drooped and died,
Since the sweetest flow'rs are soonest dust,
As truest metal is quick to rust,
Look for a change in that time of year,
When Nature's works at their best appear.

(from 'August 1837')

Mary was buried in the cemetery of Kensal Green, and on the tombstone there, following the statement of her early death, her own brother's name, George Hogarth can also be seen. George died at the age of twenty; another case of sudden early death four years after Mary, which gives us a hint of inherited weakness in the family.

Mary was, in many respects, more important to Dickens's life and his earlier works than his own wife Catherine. She was full of affection, full of intelligence, and somehow was a vivid source of literary inspiration. It seemed so, at least to Dickens. After her death, Dickens was haunted by the image of Mary now and then; a young, sweet, rather angelic image. He could not help depicting this image of Mary in his novels over and over again; as Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist*, Kate Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Mary Graham in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and lastly Agnes in *David Copperfield*. In order to know how Dickens struggled within himself after Mary's death, the only thing left to do seems to be a perusal of these novels. What was his dream, what was his conception of woman, and after all what did he gain from the loss of Mary?—these questions seem to be answered in the novels.

Returning to the Dickens House, with such a tragedy, with such a deep meaning relating to Dickens's life and works, I cannot deny that Mary's bedroom is of great interest. I saw the impressive exhibits in the room one by one, and found my mind flying far into the old days in the first half of the nineteenth century: items such as a silver pen-knife and an ink-well presented by Mary to Dickens, and a green malachite pendant, perhaps presented in return by Dickens. All of them were engraved with the initials of both, and seemed to indicate the closeness of their relationship.

Here is also an item that conveys some impression of Mary herself; a sketch of her by H.K. Brown over the mantel piece, and another one in the glass case by the window, slightly different and much smaller than the former. But a more fascinating thing is an autograph letter of Mary written in rather spiky slanting hand; vertical and horizontal lines for double use of the sheet. This letter refers to her visit to the

newly married couple Dickens and Catherine at Furnival's Inn, their residence prior to the Doughty Street house. It is fascinating to see how the sixteen year old girl was excited and tried to tell every detail that she saw and felt in her sister's married home. It had long been considered to be the only letter of Mary in existence, but another letter was discovered in 1967, and according to Professor Slater, these letters have, like Mrs. Gaskell's, 'the same rather breathless style, the same warmth of personality, the same directness and feeling of being actually spoken to by a living voice.' (*Dickens and Women*, Ch.5)

I now recollect those happy days in May sitting in the reading room of the Dickens House with some volumes in front of me. I was then working on Dickens's relations with Mary Hogarth, and was grateful to the curator Dr David Parker as well as the other staff of the museum for being always very kind and friendly to me.

It was, in a sense, rather an academic pursuit, but something more important concerning Dickens's works struck me shortly afterwards. One evening I sat at the One Man Show, which was performed once a week in the library of the Dickens House, among the audience of less than twenty people. A man wearing a morning-coat with a white scarf came in, when the light was turned down, and then he introduced himself, "Good evening, I am Charles John Huffam Dickens!" He went on to recite some opening lines of *David Copperfield* as if he were really the very author himself. It was a marvellous, brilliant beginning and his dexterity, his power, his perfect manner of presenting words and sentences quoted from Dickens's various works never ceased to enchant me during the whole show. I realized one of the most important aspects regarding how to approach Dickens, or more simply, how to read Dickens's novels. Reflecting upon my own attitude so far, I would rather say that Dickens's novels should be read in

a more relaxed, more open-hearted manner, quite free from any stiff literary thoughts or conceptions. That was what the One Man Show meant to me, and it was surely a valuable lesson.

Another event I must record here is the meeting of the Dickens Fellowship held in Bloomsbury in the middle of May. There was a discussion on *Hard Times* led by Dr Parker, and again I learnt how people enjoyed Dickens's novels rather than studied them. It was a pleasant evening when I met the members of the Fellowship there, talking over a cup of tea and then a glass of beer at a pub near by. We parted late in the evening with a promise of seeing each other again in the summer conference at Canterbury, but unfortunately I failed to fulfil the promise. Instead of attending the conference I joined in the Dickens Summer School at the University of Kent, but before I go on now, I would like to meander a little and mention something about my short trip to Broadstairs.

It was in the latter half of June when I visited 'Our English Watering-place' as Dickens called it. The Dickens Festival was being held then, and quite a crowd of visitors was seen in front of the Dickens House near the bay. They all seemed to be waiting for something. Something turned up after a while, as a matter of fact; men and women in Victorian costume appeared from a corner of the street one after another, and then began to act a scene on the lawn just in front of the House, where Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield* presumably would have shouted at anyone rudely trespassing. However, I did not think such a tourist attraction was worth seeing more than once. I only tried to picture to myself the excellent character of David's aunt by the window of the Betsey Trotwood Room, and made my way to the much quieter, less crowded precincts of "Bleak House".

"Bleak House", officially called "Fort House" in Dickens's

day, stands on the top of a cliff receiving the sea-wind direct from the coast below. It was then a place "with the green corn growing all about it and the larks singing invisible all day long." (Dickens's letter to the Duke of Devonshire) Dickens admired "Bleak House" considerably and lived there during the summer and autumn months for many years throughout his life. In this house, he completed the last chapter of *David Copperfield*, and began his next novel *Bleak House* which had in fact nothing to do with the residence itself. The House in the novel is an imaginary one somewhere near St. Albans.

"Bleak House" now serves as a Dickens museum containing treasures associated with various phases of Dickens's life, but most impressive of all seems to me the wholly private room of the novelist; his own study. Dickens here must have devoted himself to deep meditation, and to the work in progress; out of the window, nothing was visible but the sea extending far beyond. Dickens, however, did not choose to confine himself in this small study all day long; he limited his writing hours only from nine o'clock in the morning to one, and spent the rest of the day in reading, walking, playing with his children and so on. I cannot but imagine, therefore, how condensed and concentrated his hours in the study must have been.

I put up at a guest-house for the night; very close to "Bleak House", and likewise, commanding a good view of the North Sea. It was a good opportunity to dream about Dickens's life as a whole, sitting by the window overlooking a vast stretch of water with nothing but darkness in the evening, and the bursting glory at dawn.

I will now return to the matter of the Dickens Summer School at Canterbury. It was a two-week programme consisting of a variety of lectures and excursions, seemingly intended to promote wide understanding of Dickens and an academic approach to the literary subjects. I abandoned the first week of the

programme due to a private engagement, and joined in the latter half. On my arriving there, I was directed to take up one of the student apartments at Rutherford College, the University of Kent. There I began my college life from morning to evening among other overseas scholars; mostly Americans, and the number not more than fifteen altogether.

The lectures were varied, and all were, in one sense or another, effective, informative, and undoubtedly stimulating. Having listened to these lectures, however, I could not avoid thinking that the most important thing to do should be to find out the keys of enjoyment through reading Dickens's works, reading them simply, perhaps, in my own way.

Some excursions were organized between the lectures. They helped me to see the literary works in a close and familiar light. It was a memorable day when we visited the small village of Cooling, some miles north of Rochester, and the churchyard with little lozenges laid in a line on the ground. Noone was there except us; extremely quiet and somewhat deserted surroundings. Facing us was a wide stretch of field and presumably a shadow of the river farther beyond. There is no need to say that all of this atmosphere directly reminded us of the forlorn setting in the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*.

On the same day we also visited Dickens's last residence, Gad's Hill Place, now turned into a girls' school, and naturally we rambled around the town of Rochester itself.

After spending a week with Dickens in Kent, if I may put it like that, I came back to London and began to read some of Dickens's novels continuing indeed for many following weeks throughout the summer and the autumn.

I do not think I have much to mention here about my reading, except one or two things. I remember my feeling of deep sympathy for the gentle humour and robust mentality of that

great victim of circumstances, Mr Pickwick. It was a joy to read *The Pickwick Papers*, turning pages one after another, very slowly at the beginning and gradually speeding up. I also have to put down here the title of a newly-published biography, *Dickens* by Peter Ackroyd. This is a very careful, sensible study of Dickens, and the author's power of describing things and affairs is almost demonic. I found in this biography the serious lineaments of a novelist, Peter Ackroyd himself.

From Christmas up to the early days of New Year, there were several programmes based on Dickens's novels broadcast on radio and television. I heard it was not the case for this year only, and therefore I was impressed how widely, even today, Dickens remains familiar to the British public, especially as an author always connected with the feast of Christmas. As far as I noticed, there were two programmes on radio; *The Haunted Man* and *A Christmas Carol*, and some more on television; *The Pickwick Papers*, *Scrooge*, *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*.

What always interests me is the varied possibilities of adaptation, interpretation, and even transformation of the original works by Dickens. Dickens's works seem to have great potential energy to transcend the boundary of the written words, changing their own shapes and attracting people's attention in different ways. His works seem to hold inexhaustible energy within themselves and to produce offspring from time to time; and indeed a host of offspring have been born since the last century.

The musical *Oliver* ! is also one of them, which I saw at Sadler's Wells in the middle of January. This performance, with such a multitude of songs and dances, was certainly quite different from the original novel in its effect, and in its impression. I also remember the film version of *Oliver Twist* by David Lean and, compared to it, again I must admit that the

emphasis in the Musical is totally different and new. They are both, in their own style, good examples of creative treatment of the original work.

Having seen the Musical, I came back to the novel again, and this time rather enjoyed the satire beneath the powerful descriptions of recurring miseries and misfortunes. In fact, many other aspects, many other impressions of written art should emerge, if one is ready to read the work with an alert mind.

Nor can the topographical element in Dickens's novels be lightly dismissed. Regarding *Oliver Twist*, some early Dickens admirers were reported to have traced the route into London of poor Oliver, following the descriptions in the novel quite faithfully. I, myself, had some occasions to walk around an area of the Angel as well as several roads mentioned in the novel, such as Clerkenwell Road, Hatton Garden and the hidden location of the Fagin community, Saffron Hill. It is not easy, however, to imagine the dim atmosphere of the evil world in *Oliver Twist* by standing in the middle of a crowded street, a shopping precinct, a narrow lane lined with modern buildings of our day. In fact, one cannot expect too much, although it is certain that such topographical interest sometimes helps to evoke the fictitious characters and events more vividly as things close to real life.

As a matter of fact, there are a multitude of streets and areas associated with Dickens's novels, and many relevant studies have been carried out so far. Some books on this subject come up in my mind; *The London of Charles Dickens* published by London Transport and Midas Books in co-operation with the Dickens Fellowship, *Dickens's England* by Tony Lynch, *The England of Charles Dickens* by Toshikazu Nakanishi; the last one has the most exciting topographical interest.

I suspect this kind of approach, somehow, brings inevitably a feeling of disappointment. Indeed, one cannot expect too

much. Time has passed, things have changed, and very sadly, perhaps to all Dickens's serious admirers, the London and England of the nineteenth century have virtually gone. We can see, nowadays, only some relics of the old days; a relic of the walls of the Marshalsea Prison in the Borough, a relic of the life of the young journalist Charles Dickens in the Strand, Covent Garden, Fleet Street and the City, a relic of his various residences in Camden Town, Tavistock Square, Devonshire Terrace: all are mere bits and pieces.

This leads to an imminent question of great importance: where is the real Dickens, where can one find Dickens as a novelist? To consider this question, I venture to say that any one of his works, or any chapter, even any paragraph of it would suffice. One always has to go back to this level; again bits and pieces indeed, but they are full of meanings, symbolizing the nature of the whole life of a novelist. As far as one can feel constant admiration for the novelist himself, it seems to me that any bits and pieces of the novels are sufficient to imagine the truth, because the truth of a novelist can be eventually found within his novels rather than anything else. So, in the end this comes back to a question of the quality of one's response; the quality of one's heart, not the quantity nor width, nor length of one's cheap pedantic ambition.

I must be careful about unconscious pedantry within myself. I have seen not a little of Dickens's world so far, and will be seeing more, all in order to relinquish some portions of my false intellectual desire, rather than to spur it on further.

To add some more lines; in early March, I attended a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the first publication of *Barnaby Rudge* at Birkbeck College, the University of London. It was interesting again to see the general attitude of the Dickensians towards Dickens's works. I was also glad to meet Mr Colver-

son, the chairman of the Portsmouth branch of the Dickens Fellowship, who, together with his friend Mr Jackman, Hon. Secretary of the Fellowship, kindly invited me to Portsmouth. It was a few weeks before I left England; and the final day of my literary tour of the Dickens world.

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※ 本文は平成2年度跡見学園海外留学に依るものである。内容および本誌の性格上、敢えて英文筆記とした。