

F. S. SCHWARZBACH

Dickens and the City



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Preface

This study is a development of research begun for a Master of Arts thesis at Columbia University, and continued as a Ph.D. dissertation at University College London. I am profoundly grateful to the many friends and colleagues at both of these institutions who have helped me with it, but I owe far too much to far too many to be able to acknowledge adequately all my debts. I beg forgiveness in advance from those I have forgotten to mention.

By far my greatest debt is to John Sutherland, to whose patient midwifery of this work from initial conception to final product, I owe its very existence. I also owe much to Steven Marcus, for inspiring and guiding my first study of Dickens, and for the continuing inspiration of his writings on Dickens and many other subjects; to Michael Slater, for generous advice and encouragement, especially on Chapter One; to K. J. Fielding, for correcting many errors of fact in the typescript; to the librarians and staffs of the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the University College Library, the London Library, the New York Public Library, and the Pierpont Morgan Library; and to Michele Krause, for too willing and selfless assistance in researching, editing and typing this study. I should also like to thank the Dickens Society of America and the Dickens Fellowship, London, for allowing me to reprint in slightly altered form material which first appeared in these publications: *The Dickensian* (Chapter One) and *Dickens Studies Newsletter* (Chapter Six). I am grateful to the British Library Board for permission to reproduce Plates 1, 2 and 8; the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to reproduce Plates 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9, and the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum for permission to reproduce Plate 5. I am also indebted to the Trustees of the Pierpont Morgan Library and the Trustees of the New York Public Library for permission to publish brief extracts from manuscript material in their holdings. My last but by no means

least debt is to the Dean's Travel Fund and Chambers' Fund of University College for generous financial assistance toward research expenses which helped speed completion of this work.

I would also like to beg pardon for the many omissions that will be evident in a study which purports to be a developmental, chronological examination of Dickens' work. I must plead in my defence that I have tried to keep before me the main concern, Dickens and the city, and rigorously to exclude everything that did not illuminate it. The most serious omission is the failure to discuss at length *David Copperfield*; I have not done so because its inspiration and subject, at least in its early pages, are so directly autobiographical that my discussion of it has been subsumed indirectly by the sections of the Introduction below that deal with Dickens' early life.

London, March 1977

F. S. S.

A Note on References

All references to Dickens' novels, and to most of the minor writings, are to volumes of the *Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (London: Oxford, 1947-58). Those volumes of the *Clarendon Dickens* that have appeared to date have been consulted, but to avoid confusion have not been cited in the text. Those of Dickens' works not included in the *Oxford Dickens* are cited from the following: *Miscellaneous Papers*, ed. B. W. Matz, Biographical Edition (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908); *Collected Papers*, ed. Walter Dexter *et al.* (London: Nonesuch, 1938); *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. K. J. Fielding (London: Oxford, 1960); *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings*, ed. Philip Collins (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); the Nonesuch and Pilgrim editions of Dickens' letters, ed. Walter Dexter (London: Nonesuch, 1938), and Madeline House and Graham Storey *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965ff.), respectively; *Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts*, ed. Edgar Johnson (London: Cape, 1953), and *Uncollected Writings*, ed. Harry Stone (London: Allen Lane, 1969). References to all of these works, and to the revised Everyman edition of John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Dent, 1969), will be made parenthetically in the body of the text.

A number of manuscript sources have been consulted, and references to them will also be made parenthetically in the text, using the following abbreviations:

Berg Berg Collection, New York Public Library
V&A Forster Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum
PML Pierpont Morgan Library

The following standard abbreviations of Dickens' works have been used in the text when the source of a quotation is not obvious:

SB	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>	AN	<i>American Notes</i>
PP	<i>Pickwick Papers</i>	MC	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
OT	<i>Oliver Twist</i>	CB	<i>Christmas Books</i>
NN	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>	CS	<i>Christmas Stories</i>
OCS	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>	PI	<i>Pictures from Italy</i>
BR	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>	DS	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
MHC	<i>Master Humphrey's Clock</i>	DC	<i>David Copperfield</i>
		BH	<i>Bleak House</i>

HT	<i>Hard Times</i>	OMF	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
LD	<i>Little Dorrit</i>	ED	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>
RP	<i>Reprinted Pieces</i>	HW	<i>Household Words</i>
TTC	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	AYR	<i>All the Year Round</i>
UT	<i>The Uncommercial Traveller</i>	MP	<i>Miscellaneous Papers</i>
GE	<i>Great Expectations</i>		

Certain other abbreviations have been used:

<i>Life</i>	<i>Forster's Life of Charles Dickens</i>
PL	<i>Pilgrim Letters</i>
NL	<i>Nonesuch Letters</i>
PR	<i>Public Readings</i>
Coutts	<i>Letters . . . to Angela Burdett-Coutts</i>
<i>Speeches</i>	<i>Speeches of Charles Dickens</i>

References to other works have been made in the following manner: to books—the first citation in each chapter will give author, title, place publication and publisher, and successive citations, author and title; to periodicals—each citation will give author, title, the name of the periodical, the volume number and the date of publication.

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Plates 1, 2 and 8, The British Library Board;
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INTRODUCTION

The Genesis of a Myth

It may be said that Mr. Dickens's genius is especially suited to the delineation of city life. . . . He describes London like a special correspondent for posterity.

Walter Bagehot

Modern life is city life. There can be little doubt that one of the most important and far reaching of all changes in the development of human societies over the past two hundred years has been the exponential growth of large cities. An ever increasing proportion of the world's population has become concentrated in urban areas. This has happened with astonishing speed. Even as recently as 1800, it is estimated that only 2.4 per cent of the world's people lived in cities of greater than 20,000; by 1970, the ratio was 28.1 per cent. If one uses a somewhat looser definition of urban, the proportion in 1970 was 37.1 per cent, and growing rapidly. Nor, as one might expect, is this primarily a North American and European phenomenon: the countries of the world which experienced the highest rates of urban concentration between 1940 and 1960 were Venezuela, Uruguay, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Korea and New Zealand.¹

Yet, impressive though they are, these statistics alone do not accurately reflect the impact of urbanisation on the world. Given the traditional dominance of town over country, augmented considerably by modern communications and technology, the degree of urbanisation of a given society invariably is far in advance of the numerical proportion of its people living in cities.² In this sense, the world we inhabit is already an urban one.

The implications of this global change in the nature of human society are monumental, and clearly involve far more than merely a shift in geographical patterns of residence. Human nature has been, and is being, transformed. Urbanisation has meant the development of a new way of life, an urban culture

and an urban sensibility, that which we call quintessentially 'modern'. To study and by doing so to come to understand this transformation, is one of the great intellectual projects of our age.

For a variety of reasons, the study of urbanisation has been carried out most systematically and in the greatest detail upon England. For one thing, England was among the first, if not the very first, of modern countries to become urbanised: more people in England lived in towns than in the country as early as 1850. England has also been examined so extensively simply because reliable, documented sources of statistical information for most of the nineteenth century (and often earlier) exist and are readily available. It is therefore not surprising that the process of urbanisation in England has been studied in great detail from many points of view: historical, sociological, technological, economic, and so on. Yet, oddly enough, literary studies have been slow to recognise the importance of the broad cultural impact of the growth of urban living.³

This book is an attempt to begin to redress that imbalance. It examines one aspect of the cultural impact of urbanisation in nineteenth-century England, as it affected the life and literary work of one man, Charles Dickens. There are several important reasons for concentrating such a study upon Dickens. Walter Bagehot's magnificently apt remark, that Dickens described his city 'like a special correspondent for posterity',⁴ is one which all subsequent readers would endorse. Indeed, as any student of the social history of the Victorian period knows, when one turns to specialised studies to check the accuracy of Dickens' observations, as often as not, Dickens is quoted as the leading witness on that very matter. What was the criminal underworld like in early Victorian London? Turn to *Oliver Twist*, we are told. What was it like to experience railway travel for the first time? Turn, we are told, to *Dombey and Son*; and so on. The accuracy and sheer inexhaustible scope of Dickens' observations of contemporary urban life alone would make him the most important Victorian writer for such a study as this. One need only compare the London of Dickens' novels to that of many of his contemporaries to appreciate the difference in the quality of the reportage. The city as it appears in the earliest of London novels, Pierce

Egan's *Life in London* (1822-4), is curiously flat and insubstantial. That of Bulwer Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830), one of the few city novels of the early 1830s, is a cardboard backdrop lacking in authenticity.

It is also true that Dickens is virtually the only English writer of any great stature to engage in a sustained effort to write about the city during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. With the later exception of Mrs Gaskell, who wrote about Manchester, no other important writer of fiction dealt extensively with the city. To find writers other than Dickens who wrote about London in any detail and over a substantial period of time, one must turn to people of much lesser talent, like Augustus Mayhew (brother of Henry Mayhew, author of *London Labour and the London Poor*) and Douglas Jerrold, or the prolific hack, G. W. M. Reynolds, chief author of the immense serial, *Mysteries of London* (1846-50). Even later in the century, many major literary figures avoided London material, as for many years did George Eliot, who detested the metropolis, and Tennyson, who rarely could come closer in his verse to London than Camelot. Several concentrated upon contemporary London in single works—Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), Trollope in *The Way We Live Now* (1874-5), George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and Henry James in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). But they cannot rightly be called city writers, for they rarely wrote about the city elsewhere. Dickens alone offers an *oeuvre* which is 'about' the city, and is of great literary merit.⁵

In addition, there is another facet of Dickens' genius that makes such a study of his work vitally important. Trollope mockingly referred to Dickens as 'Mr Popular Sentiment' in *The Warden* (1854), but he understood that Dickens did have a special gift for comprehending, representing and even guiding the popular mind. Dickens' own thoughts, opinions and pronouncements on every matter from penal reform to the suppression of the Indian mutiny often may be contradictory and inconsistent, but almost always reflect the broad consensus of enlightened public opinion. Even in his life-long campaigns for Poor Law and sanitary reform, both of which were initially unpopular, minority Radical causes, one senses that Dickens was acting as spokesman for the 'Good Angel' of contemporary

conscience, and eventually Parliament and the governing classes were brought round to accept his point of view.⁶

Dickens' special gifts went further than enabling him to act as the voice of contemporary opinion: he had the ability, as has perhaps no other English writer since Shakespeare, to enter into the heart and mind of a character so completely, that the character can virtually walk off the page, and be treated as a personage with an identity distinct from that of its creator. Dickens' characters seem to have been created with ideas, beliefs and views of their world which appear uncannily real. They appear to speak and think autonomously, as other people actually did, and to hold thoughts in their minds that Dickens himself often did not. And so, for all these reasons, to read Dickens is to read the imprint of the consciousness of an age. Dickens is *the* representative Victorian.

By calling Dickens representative, I do not mean to say he was in any way typical, for he was certainly a most atypical man. Rather, I believe that he is representative by virtue of his unique creative imagination. It was this gift which allowed him to evoke in his writing a world as close to that in which he lived as one ever could in words. By understanding him and the development of his work, we can understand a great deal about his entire culture and society. Therefore, while this volume studies the interrelations of the city and the life and work of Charles Dickens, and so is primarily the story of an individual, I trust that if it does this adequately, it will also illumine a larger and now obscure area of Victorian culture.

At the same time, I intend that the implications of this work should be much wider. Although primarily a study of literature, of necessity it has entailed the study of the development of the city itself during Dickens' lifetime. For this reason, I have found it necessary to move beyond those areas of study to which literary criticism recently has confined itself, and to bring to bear upon the central problem insights derived from the disciplines of history, social history, sociology and psychology, as well as from the close study of the texts themselves. Though I am well aware of my limited competence in these fields, I hope that my utilisation of them, however inadequate, may yet indicate what of value they can add to literary studies. And, in so far as I have

been successful, I also hope I shall have demonstrated that literary studies shed light on the history and culture of a period as well.

II

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in the small naval town of Portsea, the first son of John Dickens, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. From time to time, John Dickens was transferred to different offices, and the family moved several times during Charles' childhood, first of all to London toward the end of 1814. Apparently the family remained there until the summer of 1817, when they moved to Chatham, a large shipbuilding town close to Rochester in Kent, where they were to stay some four years. Young Charles retained almost no memory of his first years in London, and little at all of anything before the move to Kent. But throughout his life, those years he would spend at Chatham constituted the stuff of his happiest and most treasured memories—centred around long walks in the surrounding rural areas, to Strood, Cobham and Gad's Hill, where there stood a large house that Dickens' father told him he might one day own if he worked very hard.

John Dickens worked very hard, and by 1820 was earning over £350 per year, a very substantial salary. But he was impecunious by nature, and as his family and income grew, so did his debts. In March 1821 the Dickenses economised by moving to a smaller house; then, probably in November, John Dickens was recalled to Somerset House in London. Charles, at school under a kindly master named William Giles, stayed on until Christmas. Then, travelling alone by coach, he came to London to join the family, now living in a small house in Bayham Street, Camden Town, then a lower middle class suburb where less affluent clerks and tradesmen were their neighbours.

But even by stringent economies, the family finances could not be rescued, and though Charles remained idle for some time, eventually it was decided that he should go to work. On 9 February 1824—just two days after his twelfth birthday—Charles was sent (through the influence of a near relation) to work at Warren's Blacking Warehouse off the Strand, pasting

labels on blacking pots.⁷ Two weeks afterwards, the final collapse came, and John Dickens was imprisoned in the Marshalsea for debt. The family, all except Charles, moved inside the prison shortly after that, while the boy lived in a succession of lodging houses, first in Camden Town, and then in Lant Street near the Marshalsea. Meanwhile, John Dickens had initiated proceedings to be freed under the Insolvent Debtors Act, and to be pensioned off by the Navy Pay Office. Late in May he was released from prison. But Charles, to his horror and despair, was allowed to remain at the Blacking Warehouse. One day shortly afterward, it seems his father saw him at work, exposed to public view in a large window as a kind of working advertisement. His father was humiliated on his account, and either at once or a few days later he was taken home. He had been there about four or five months. In June, he resumed his education, as a day pupil at a nearby school, Wellington House Academy.

Dickens remained there until 1827, when he was found a place as a clerk in a legal office. While there, he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later became a freelance reporter (or stenographer) at Doctor's Commons, an obscure and antiquated London court, situated between St Paul's and the Thames. Then, with the aid of a journalist uncle, he began a career as a parliamentary reporter, a job for which shorthand was essential, as most of the work consisted of transcribing debates *verbatim*. At this work he was extremely successful, and was said to have been the finest reporter in the House when he left it. While still a reporter, he began writing short stories, and achieved a modest success with them in the literary world—but that is to anticipate another story.

This outline of Dickens' childhood and youth contains only the barest facts. It is the history of a young boy who grows up in a small seaport with pleasant rural surroundings; is taken to London at the age of eleven, and about a year later is sent to work, if not actually in a factory at least in a manual trade; and then with a little bit of luck and a great deal of personal exertion, raises himself to a financially secure social rank in a respectable journalistic, and later literary, career. It is one version of the typical Victorian success story. Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859) contains capsule biographies of dozens of Dickens' successful

contemporaries, self-made men whose lives follow the same rough outline. The story, in this respect, is not unique, but is highly typical.

Indeed, so far is it from being unique, this story of the move from country to city is typical not only of many of Dickens' more eminent contemporaries, but is the story of millions of English men and women during his lifetime. Even an amateur can sense this from a glance at some of the statistics of population growth and change at this time. (See accompanying table.)⁸

Population of England and Wales

1801	8,893,000	1811	10,164,000
1851	17,928,000 [102%]	1821	12,000,000 [18%]
[Figures in brackets are percentage increases]			

Population of Towns of 100,000 or greater in England and Wales (inc. London)

1801	1 (i.e. London)
1811	2
1821	4
1851	8

Number of Towns of 50,000 or greater in England and Wales (inc. London)

1801	6
1811	8
1821	9
1851	22

Ratio of Rural/Urban Population

1801	70%/30%
1851	49%/51%

Percentage of Population by Age Group, 1821

0-4	13.5
5-19	34.0
20-44	32.0
45+	19.0

From 1801 to 1851, a period spanning the ten years prior to Dickens' birth to about his fortieth birthday, England's population doubled. The magnitude of this increase was unprecedented,

and historians still do not agree on an explanation of how and why it happened; yet even more unprecedented was the shift of that burgeoning population towards cities. In 1801, 70 per cent of the population had lived in rural areas; by the census of 1851, the balance between town and country had shifted, albeit by one percentage point, in the opposite direction. London's population alone grew from 1,088,000 in 1801 to 2,491,000 in 1851, and by almost a quarter of a million in just the first decade of Dickens' life. The rate of increase, averaging 20 per cent per decade, was always in excess of the national growth rate. And even London was growing slowly in comparison with provincial cities like Manchester, Bolton and Birmingham, which were experiencing decennial growth rates of over 40 per cent at various times early in the century.

Throughout the first half of the century, migration was the major component of this increase in the numbers of city dwellers.⁹ It is not difficult to understand why this must have been so. In the first place, it appears that fertility rates were considerably lower in the city than in the country. Perhaps more importantly, cities were places which tended to devour their inhabitants even as they were born. The infant mortality rate for all of England remained level at roughly 155 per 1000 over the entire period, 1800–50. (By contrast, the rates in modern industrial nations at the present time are generally lower than 20 per 1000.) But this average, however high it is by current standards, masks the even more appalling rates that prevailed inside large cities. Figures of about 250 per 1000 were typical urban averages, and in certain districts of Manchester, for example, it is estimated to have exceeded 500 per 1000. A child born there had less than a one in two chance of living to a first birthday. It was only as late as the 1850s and 1860s that English towns were beginning to produce their own population growth, rather than continuing to import it.

The conclusion to be drawn from these figures is that if there were in 1851 approximately six million more city dwellers in England and Wales than there had been in 1801, most of them must have been born in the country and moved to the city at some point in their lives.¹⁰ This, too, was likely to have happened to most of them when they were fairly young, for as the figures