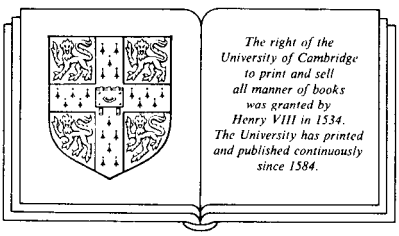
Dickens and the 1830s

DICKENS AND THE 1830s

KATHRYN CHITTICK



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To
Garfield Dixon Chittick
(1927–1981)

"the sunk pillar"
(Carlyle)

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Preface

This study began as a historical account of the critical commentary that the work of Charles Dickens received during the early years of his writing career. My intention was not to compile statistical information about Dickens's readers or reputation but to consider his direction as an apprentice author in the context of London literary life during the 1830s. It was the profession of authorship that emerged as the dominant theme of my research, as I began to see that Dickens's transformation into a novelist during the years 1833 to 1841 was not the inevitable matter it is usually taken to be.

Dickens published his first sketch in December 1833; it was no more than the work of an anonymous and unpaid contributor to the old *Monthly Magazine*. Although he might be a professional newspaperman, he was still an amateur in authorship. Eight years later, by December 1841, after nine books, three plays, and three magazines, Dickens, not yet thirty years old, worried that he might have written himself out. The work that was to have made his reputation as a respectable author, a three-volume historical novel in the mode of Sir Walter Scott, had been promised to his publisher in 1836; it did not appear until 1841 and went almost totally unnoticed. With the failure of that work, *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens saw the literary profession he had projected for himself about to dwindle away: he could no longer rely on a mere change of binding to translate serial instalments into cloth volumes. All this was a matter of public knowledge and discussion in the periodical literature of the day.

In considering the development of Dickens during these years and how his writing changed the conventional generic expectations of the novel, one is in fact considering the literary criticism of the 1830s. After looking at one hundred and twenty magazines and newspaper titles – something like 25,000 daily issues, 12,000 weekly issues, 3,500 monthly issues, and 225 quarterly issues – I have seen over eight hundred reviews of Dickens's work for the years 1833–41. In attempting to understand the literary scene onto which he made his entrance, I have also looked at four hundred reviews of ancillary

interest which treat of such topics as the status of the professional journalist, the nature of the contemporary novel, and the domination of literary life by Reform Bill politics. All these things had their part in what was seen by contemporary critics as the decline of the traditional canon of literature. It is a small but notable fact that Dickens was not reviewed under the heading of "Literature" when he began writing those works that are now classics of the English curriculum. This points to a historical difference between what the term meant for the early nineteenth century and what it means for us. During the 1830s, books of biography and literary criticism filled the newspaper columns under "Literature," while novels were found among the ephemeral notices; reviews of Dickens's books are generally to be looked for under the headings of "Magazine Day" and "Miscellaneous." Today, Dickens is a staple of literary studies, while it is considered mildly innovative to include biography in the curriculum and to argue that criticism is itself a type of fiction writing. In 1830, biography was unquestionably part of the literary canon, and criticism was far more respectable than the novel.

The definition of "Literature" is also crucial to the later chapters, as I follow Dickens's transition from reporter to author. I attempt to understand what the prospects facing Dickens were in 1833, when he had already won some acclaim as a reporter, and to show the direction given him by contemporary commentators, some of whom were known to him personally. The explosion of reviews during 1837–38 forms the most intense period of his early career, and it was the notice given *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* that may be said to have propelled Dickens to the attention of the quarterly guardians of literature.

Yet, at the same time, Dickens seems to show a far more determined interest in becoming known as an editor. The preface written for *Nicholas Nickleby* at the close of its serial run, and the alacrity with which he took up plans for *Master Humphrey's Clock* when his editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany* ended, show Dickens's fondness for the editorial role. This aspect of his early writing cannot be overlooked: the preoccupation of Dickens with journalistic ventures helped change the generic nature of the novel. *Pickwick* was essentially a magazine consisting of only one article, and *Oliver Twist* merely political ephemera, before they came arbitrarily to be bound in cloth volumes and called novels.

However, Dickens's failure to become the editor of a popular magazine and to project himself as a historical novelist meant

that by 1841 he was forced to halt and consider where his future direction as a writer was to lie. The Victorian novel has many beginnings, and Dickens's insistence on remaining a Fleet Street man is one of them. The discussion of how his works moved from the ''Magazine'' columns to the ''Literature'' columns is both a historical and a critical one.

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It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help of all those who have made the experience of writing this book such an enjoyable one. K. J. Fielding introduced me to Dickens scholarship, and I benefited inestimably from early discussions with him. John Sutherland and Philip Collins were generous, too, in sharing their knowledge of Dickens and Victorian studies. And Roy Graham also encouraged me through the years with my thinking about this research. For guidance in the field of Victorian periodicals, I must, as always, thank Merrill Distad.

Most of my research has been done at the National Library of Scotland, where the staff met my requests with unfailing assiduity and humour, and I have fond memories of my summers there. The British Library at Bloomsbury was also important to my research, and I am grateful for access to that collection and to the collection of nineteenth-century newspapers at Colindale, which is unrivalled. The Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick, with its exceptional collection of Dickens material, proved an unexpectedly significant aid.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided the main source of my financial support for these researches, and Queen's University and Trent University were generous with their limited research funds. And I should also like to acknowledge the assistance of Anthony Pugh and Anne Cameron at the University of New Brunswick in helping me to pursue this work.

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The book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Garfield Dixon Chittick, whose gentle curiosity was unquenchable and who pursued his researches with persistence and complete self-abandonment.

Note on the text

To save on footnoting, most references to contemporary periodicals are given parenthetically after the passages quoted. For a complete list of the periodicals consulted as background research to this study, the reader is advised to see my *The Critical Reception of Charles Dickens 1833–1841* (New York: Garland, 1989). It includes approximately eight hundred reviews of Dickens's works for these years and another four hundred reviews of critical interest for the years 1814–41; the reviews are listed by chronological appearance, by periodical, and by the work of Dickens reviewed.

References to Dickens's works are to the original editions except where stated otherwise.