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FRENCH CROSSINGS: I. TALES OF TWO CITIES

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ABSTRACT. Under the general title, ‘French Crossings’, the presidential addresses over the next four years will explore intersections and relationships between cultures, periods, disciplines, approaches, historiographies and problems, all within the general field of early modern and modern French history. ‘Tales of Two Cities’ takes as its approach both comparative history and *l’histoire croisée*. It compares and contrasts the very differing cultural impact on each side of the Channel of one of the most influential British novels about Franco-British political culture, namely, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The novel has been conventionally hailed in England, especially from the end of the nineteenth century, as a parable unfavourably contrasting France’s revolutionary tradition with the allegedly more humane political evolutionism of England. In France, the novel has been largely ignored or else viewed as a Burkean rant. Yet Dickens’s personal attitudes towards France and in particular Paris suggests a more ambiguous and complicated history. For Dickens, modern Paris, as regenerated under Haussmann, was a brilliant success story against which he contrasted both Paris in the 1790s and the social and political circumstances he claimed to detect within English metropolitan culture in the recent past and present. Dickens views the radical and disinherited workers’ suburb of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine less, it is suggested, as quintessentially French than as quintessentially plebeian, and the prospect of a slide into revolutionary politics as a lurking threat within England as well as France.

At his recent Regius Professorial Lecture at Cambridge, published in fuller form as a book, *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, Richard Evans made the excellent point that British university history departments are often more diverse in their scholarly interests than their peers in other European countries. By his calculation, scholars of foreign history account for some 44 per cent of a sample group of history departments – and of this cohort, 10 per cent

are historians of France.¹ I am proud and happy to number myself among them. But I am also aware that this situation makes me unusual among presidents of this Society. Since the late nineteenth century, the majority of presidents (with some very distinguished exceptions) have been historians of England, and they have used the generous canvas of four successive presidential addresses as an opportunity to explore the state of a key issue or else to offer a synthesis in regard to some knotty problem or major theme in, usually, English history.² My approach will not follow this model. This also owes something to the fact that my range of academic interests is quite diverse. After a combined honours degree in History and French at Oxford, I started, and continue, research as a historian of the French Revolution. I feel most comfortable in the eighteenth century, but have strayed much wider, writing general histories of France and of Paris. The history of medicine is a strong area of engagement, as is the study of historiography. Recent work ranges into the history of the emotions, of physiognomy, caricature, surrealism and literature. With this kind of approach to French history, multi-period as well as cross-disciplinary, it seemed that if I ranged more widely and more disparately than is the presidential custom I would play to any strengths I may have. So, sacrificing homogeneity and synthesis, I will follow my interests.

‘French Crossings’ is the title I have taken for my set of presidential addresses and in this and in future years, I will be crossing periods, crossing approaches, crossing disciplines and crossing problems. These crossings will always involve France and its history, since France provides the framework and the focus for all my work. In this paper, I shall be dabbling in comparative Anglo-French history, even though I am somewhat sceptical about that genre. Comparative history is too often set within the framework of the nation-state and privileges social-structural methodologies. Although laudably aiming at a better understanding of two societies, it often works in practice with an internally stable and homogenised notion of those societies – and so ends up freezing and fortifying national stereotypes rather than undermining or subverting them. This looks problematic in an era of globalisation, especially too among historians eager to take the so-called cultural turn. Though there will be a comparativist aspect to my paper, my main inspiration comes from what Germanist scholars Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have called, in contradistinction to comparative history, *l’histoire croisée* – intercrossing or entangled history.³ *L’histoire croisée*

¹ Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders. British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, 2009), 12–13, 16. The statistics are not very reliable, but probably do give rough approximations.

² For a full list, see the website of the Society, <http://www.royalhistoricalsociety.org> (10 Jan. 2010).

³ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity’, *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), 30–50; *De la comparaison*

highlights accounts conducted below the waterline of the nation-state and using varying frames and scales of reference. It also seeks to register the ways in which acts of crossing and intercrossing generate effects, repercussions and impacts on the societies involved, and also on the things (individuals, practices, objects) that do the crossing. Far from remaining intact and identical in form, these are transformed in the process of crossing. *L'histoire croisée* is also open to a principle of reflexivity: that is, it encompasses how historians are personally implicated – entangled in fact – within the process of their historical investigation.

What I shall be doing in this paper is simply to follow a person and an object in their crossings of the Channel over time. The person is Charles Dickens; and the object, his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.⁴ The time frame for my analysis, which will combine both comparative history and *l'histoire croisée*, is the last 150 years: very precisely so, for the novel was published in 1859. The last weekly instalment of the novel in Dickens's periodical, *All the Year Round*, was issued on 26 November 1859, 150 years ago.⁵

As is well known, crossing, passing and doubling are fundamental features of the plot of a novel whose characters are always in the 'habit of passing and re-passing between France and England' (*ATOTC*, 68). Yet in many ways, as we shall see, the novel generally has been viewed as reinforcing national stereotypes. Dickens is invariably seen as a one of the greatest and most quintessentially English of writers – *The Times* saluted him on his death as 'the Great Commoner of English Literature'.⁶ His novel's very title has become almost a charter for comparative, contrastive

à l'histoire croisée, ed. *idem* and *eadem* (Paris, 2004); *Le travail et la nation: histoire croisée de la France et de l'Allemagne*, ed. Bénédicte Zimmermann, Claude Didry and Peter Wagner (Paris, 1999); *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)*, ed. Michel Espagne and Michael Werner (Paris, 1988); Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, 'Introduction: Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History – Definitions', in *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, ed. *eadem* and *eadem* (2004) ix–xxiv; H. G. Haupt and J. Kocka, 'Comparative History: Methods, Aims, Problems', and Nancy L. Green, 'Forms of Comparison', both in *ibid.*, 23–39, 41–56; Deborah Cohen, 'Comparative History: Buyer Beware', *GHI Bulletin*, 29 (2001), 23–33; Stefan Berger, 'Comparative History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (2003), 161–79.

⁴ Michael Slater's definitional biography, *Charles Dickens* (2009), supersedes earlier lives. This paper also draws heavily upon Dickens's correspondence and journalism, for which I have used the authoritative *The British Academy Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey *et al.* (12 vols., Oxford, 1965–2002), and *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism*, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew (4 vols., 1994–2000). For the novel, I have used the Penguin Classics edition, ed. Richard Maxwell (new edn, London, 2003). To lighten the footnotes I will henceforth bracket references to these in the text as follows: *Letters*, *Journalism*; and *ATOTC*, indicating volume and page numbers.

⁵ By chance, the lecture on which this paper is based was delivered on 27 November 2009, making it 150 years plus a day after 26 November 1859. 27 November 2009 was 150 years to the day when English readers awoke to discover that Sydney Carton had had his head cut off.

⁶ Cited in Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 618.

history at macro, nation-state level. It is a novel set in two cities, Paris and London, but through them it has been taken to be in essence about two contrasting political cultures – France’s revolutionary tradition, and England’s evolutionary trajectory.⁷ The equation between London as social order incarnate, Paris as insurrectionary ferment, reflects a growing complacency within England about the two societies which then, in the 1850s, was just hardening into mid-Victorian orthodoxy. By seeming to offer a tale of two contrasting political pathways, a tale of two civilisations, *A Tale of Two Cities* accrued a persistent, talismanic cultural and emotional presence around which national identity crystallised. The novel became, in sum, an English ‘site of memory’ – or *lieu de mémoire* – as French historian Pierre Nora would put it.⁸

A Tale of Two Cities has almost certainly been more influential in shaping British culture’s view of the French Revolution than the work of any mere historian. For every one reader of Thomas Carlyle’s *French Revolution* (or even William Doyle’s, for that matter), there must be a hundred who will have sampled *A Tale of Two Cities* in some form. There was indeed a time when every British schoolchild could recite (and every stand-up comedian could bowdlerise) the opening lines of this arch-English *lieu de mémoire* – ‘it was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ – and the punchline of its closing peroration, as tragic hero Sydney Carton goes self-sacrificially to the guillotine doubling, passing, as another man, with indeed (since we are going to be talking about such things) a second identity, ‘it is a far, far better thing that I do now than I have ever done’. Writing in 1940, George Orwell observed that the novel must bear much of the responsibility for the fact that ‘the average Englishman’ still viewed revolution as ‘no more than a pyramid of severed heads’.⁹

I shall argue that there is much more that is interesting and ambivalent about the novel than this (as Orwell was indeed aware). There are, I hope to show, quite a number of tales to tell about *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Before we look at the novel, however, I shall confess – with a nod towards the reflexivity highlighted in *l’histoire croisée* – my own ‘entanglements’ in the subject of this paper: to note that my own crossings – my

⁷ See e.g. Claire Hancock, *Paris et Londres au XIXe siècle: représentations dans les guides et récits de voyage* (Paris, 2003), esp. 167ff; C. Dever, ‘“An Occult and Immoral Tyranny”: The Novel, the Police and the Agent Provocateur’, in *The Literary Channel: The International Invention of the Novel*, ed. C. Dever and M. Cohen (Princeton, 2002), 225–50, esp. 229ff.

⁸ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’, *Representations*, special issue, ‘Memory and Counter-Memory’, 26 (1989), 7–24. Nora was introducing to an Anglophone audience a publishing project later conveniently issued in three volumes as *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1997). Parts have been translated into English and the project has spawned a veritable exegetical tradition – to which I hope to return in a future address.

⁹ George Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, in *idem, Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (1940), 1–85, at 25.

own ‘habit of passing and repassing between France and England’ – have inevitably influenced what I have to say. My own serious and serial French crossings began when I was a student, guided by my doctoral supervisor, the late Richard Cobb. Cobb’s approach to doctoral supervision was very simple: he wanted his students to get across the Channel as fast as possible, to stay there, dug into the archives, for as long as they could, and to develop as swiftly as they might be able what he, describing his own experiences as ‘an Anglo-French historian’, called ‘a second identity’.¹⁰ What Cobb detested above all were historians who wrote from their Oxbridge colleges or London clubs, who rarely crossed the Channel and who invariably ended up retailing national stereotypes. Admiration for one particular scholar was irreparably damaged when Cobb learnt that he had only ever been to the Archives Nationales once, sat in the *salle de lecture* for a single morning – and found the experience so alienating and intimidating that he ran back to London and never repeated the experience.

Cobb regarded national stereotypes much as Lucien Febvre, the great founder of the *Annales*, regarded anachronism: namely, as the historian’s cardinal sin above all others.¹¹ It was Cobb’s belief that immersion within French society and culture would proof us against any tendency towards national stereotyping – and help us produce better history. His antidote against stereotyping was to invite us to view our encounter with France as an anthropological field trip to an alien culture – but it was anthropology with a difference, for we were encouraged to believe that that alien culture was in many respects superior to our own. It was also Cobb’s particular point of pride that, because of his excellent accent and his frequent presence in France, he could invariably pass as French (something most of us can only envy). The supreme achievement of understanding French men and women was thus to be able to pass as one; and Cobb recorded how on crossing the Channel to France he would find that when he was talking his hands and mouth strangely started to do different things from when he was in England. Cobb the cultural anthropologist thus doubled the talented impersonator – crossing mixed with passing.¹²

¹⁰ Richard Cobb, *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (Oxford, 1969), esp. the Introduction, ‘Experience of an Anglo-French Historian’, 1–50. For more on Cobb, Colin Lucas, ‘Richard Charles Cobb’, in *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; and my essay, ‘Olwen Hufton’s “Poor”, Richard Cobb’s “People” and the Notions of the *Longue Durée* in French Revolutionary Historiography’, in *The Art of Survival: Gender and History in Europe, 1450–2000*, ed. Ruth Harris and Lyndal Roper, Past and Present Supplement 1 (Oxford, 2006), 178–203.

¹¹ Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle. La religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1947 edn), 6: ‘le péché des péchés – le péché entre tous irrémédiable’.

¹² Cobb, *A Second Identity*, 50. Cobb prided himself as being a latter-day *sans-culotte* (the subject of his studies), and he shared with them a taste for rhetorical violence and exaggeration, irreverently nonconformist behaviour and wild drinking.

Richard Evans's *Cosmopolitan Islanders* devotes some colourful pages to Cobb, yet while noting his achievement as a historian, it concludes that at bottom Cobb and those who derived inspiration from his example remained 'fundamentally British'.¹³ This is an unsatisfactory description, and Evans seems fundamentally to miss the point. Cobb's notion of a 'second identity' was grounded in the belief that by dint of crossing and re-crossing the Channel between England and France, he became a different individual. It was not just about hand-and-mouth gestures; it was about how to think and how to write – indeed how to be. In these post-modern times we can surely accept a more fragmented, fluid and generous sense of identity and subjectivity than Evans allows. In this paper, I shall be writing if not as a fully fledged 'Anglo-French historian' as Cobb claimed to be, then at least as an 'entangled' historian, an historian 'inter-crossing' so to speak, whose quality of perception and whose historical judgement have been altered by prolonged exposure to another culture – by French crossings in fact. And I will be focusing on an author, Charles Dickens, who is less 'fundamentally British' than he is accounted, and a novel which, I shall argue, plays more complicatedly with national stereotypes than is usually realised.¹⁴

A Tale of Two Cities made a huge impact on its appearance in 1859, enjoyed instant popularity and received considerable critical acclaim. Yet it appears to have been at the very end of the nineteenth century that it really established itself in the British national consciousness. What elevated it to another level as an emblem of national identity, as a *lieu de mémoire* in effect, was the production in February 1899 of a play based on the novel entitled *The Only Way* that the theatrical impresario John Martin-Harvey presented at London's Lyceum Theatre – with himself in the starring role of Sydney Carton. As Joss Marsh has shown,¹⁵ the play nailed down its place in the national imagination when, several months later, in the Boer War, the English commander at the siege of Mafeking, General (later Über-Scout) Robert Baden Powell kept up morale among the troops by staging a production of *The Only Way*. Sydney Carton's final, dying words on the scaffold – 'it is a far, far better thing' – seemed apt for that Mafeking moment. Baden-Powell's stroke of imperial *sangfroid* helped to ensure Martin-Harvey's play lasting success, and won him, like

¹³ Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, 153 (and more generally 142–53).

¹⁴ Some of these ideas are explored in *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities and the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh and Jon Mee (Basingstoke, 2009), 'Introduction', 1–23.

¹⁵ In discussing the play and its resonance, I draw heavily on Joss Marsh's essay, 'Mimi and the Matinée Idol: Martin-Harvey, Sydney Carton and the Staging of *A Tale of Two Cities*', in *Charles Dickens and the French Revolution*, ed. Jones *et al.*, 126–45. Further details are in *The Autobiography of Sir John Martin-Harvey* (1933); Nicholas Butler, *John Martin-Harvey: Biography of an Actor-Manager* (Colchester, 1997); and H. Philip Bolton, *Dickens Dramatized* (1987).

Baden-Powell, the status of national hero. Martin-Harvey's entry to the salons of dukes and duchesses was assured, race-horses were named after him, posters of the guillotine scene proliferated and music-hall comedians did impressions of him as Sydney Carton. The ultimate accolade was quasi-plagiarism: Sydney Carton's popularity at the *fin de siècle* helps explain the great popular success enjoyed by the Baroness d'Orzcy's much inferior *Scarlet Pimpernel*, first in 1903 as a play and then from 1905 as a novel.

In the Great War, Martin-Harvey would play his Carton to British footsoldiers in the trenches, with bombs whistling round his ears. It was for 'their beloved *Tale of Two Cities*', he noted in his memoirs, that 'they always called'.¹⁶ Troops idolised the final guillotine tableau with its 'far, far better thing' eclipsing even a strong challenge from the 'Once more unto the breach' of Shakespeare's Prince Hal. Both these scenes, incidentally, represented Britain's allies, the French, as the enemy – but no one seemed to mind, or maybe even notice. What was crucial about the play and particularly the final scene was less the precise national identity of Carton's executioners than the opportunity the death-scene afforded for the construction of a melodramatic yet peculiarly potent form of stoical, calm, self-sacrificial, stiff-upper-lip English masculinity. Paradoxically it is Sydney Carton's capacity to lose his head while others all around him were keeping theirs which marks him out as a model Edwardian, Kipling-esque man.¹⁷

Sir John Martin-Harvey would play in around 2,500 theatrical performances of *The Only Way*, continuing during the interwar period, and occurring throughout the English provinces, in Ireland – James Joyce's Molly Bloom caught the show when it hit Dublin, the final monologue of *Ulysses* reveals – and into Canada and north America.¹⁸ The eminence of a play that its author hailed as 'the popular masterpiece' of English theatre was confirmed by a film version in 1925. 'The Only Way', the movie magazine, *Variety*, noted in September 1925, 'marks a gigantic forward movement in British film production . . . Never in the history of a picture shown in this country has an audience deliberately refused to leave the theatre and called insistently for the leading actor and producer.'¹⁹ The play's extraordinary hold on the broad Anglophone

¹⁶ *Autobiography*, 483; Butler, *John Martin-Harvey*, 106.

¹⁷ For Edwardian masculinity generally, see John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2005).

¹⁸ Though Martin-Harvey claimed to have played 5,000 performances, his biographer Nicholas Butler has documented 2,475 (5). For Dublin, cf. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (9th reimpession, London, 1960), 911.

¹⁹ Cited in Marsh, 'Mimi and the Matinée Idol', 142 n. 3. For other studies on Dickens on film, see Judith Buchanan and Alex Newhouse, 'Sanguine Mirages, Cinematic Dreams: Things Seen and Things Imagined in the 1917 Fox Feature Film *A Tale of Two Cities*', and

public was strengthened by the appearance in 1935 of another Hollywood version of *A Tale of Two Cities*, this time with the actor and quintessential stage Englishman Ronald Coleman putting in an Oscar-nominated performance as Sydney Carton. His interpretation was definitional, and successors in the role – including Dirk Bogarde in the 1958 British film of the novel – have tended to impersonate Ronald Coleman as much as to play Sydney Carton. By the time of Coleman's appearance, Martin-Harvey had already grown rich and fat in the lead role of the play, *The Only Way*, well after he was aesthetically or athletically equipped for it. He was seventy-six years old in his final, 2,465th performance in the role in Newcastle at another high moment of English patriotism: May 1939, the eve of war. 'It was a far, far better thing' seemed apt in an odd, proto-Churchillian way – and indeed Martin-Harvey was developing a Churchillian chubbiness. Never in the course of British theatre history had an actor owed so much fame and repute to so little plausible resemblance to the dashing young character he was playing.

But what did the French make of all this? What was the reception of Dickens's novel in France? In effect, under the comparativist lens, *A Tale of Two Cities* has been a tale of two receptions: one warm and impassioned, the other, as we shall see, quizzical and rejecting. The French reading public, it must be said, did not dislike Dickens. On the contrary. He was very popular across the Channel, his journalism and extracts from his novels appearing in French periodicals from the late 1830s. In 1856, he signed a contract with Hachette which gave that publishing house translation options over all his novels and short stories. Dickens was soon being recognised by strangers in the streets on visits to Paris, and he rejoiced to discover his novels available in translation 'at every railway station, great or small' (*Letters*, x, 151).²⁰ Yet the appearance of the French translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1861 failed to ignite public interest across the Channel. Significantly, Dickens refrained from performing in France public readings of his abbreviated version of *A Tale of Two Cities*, preferring to expose his Parisian audience to *David Copperfield*, *Christmas Carol*, *Dombey and Son* and the *Pickwick Papers*.²¹

Charles Barr, 'Two Cities, Two Films', both in *Charles Dickens and the French Revolution*, ed. Jones *et al.*, 146–65, 166–87, and, more generally, Jason W. Stevens, 'Insurrection and Depression-Era Politics in Selznick's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935)', *Literature Film Quarterly* (2006), 176–94; and Pascal Dupuy, 'La diffusion des stéréotypes révolutionnaires dans la littérature et le cinéma anglo-saxons, 1789–1989', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (1966), 511–28.

²⁰ For reception details, see also *Letters*, III, 399, 502n, VII, 39–40, VIII, 726–7.

²¹ *Charles Dickens. The Public Readings*, ed. Philip Collins (Oxford, 1975). For the abbreviated version of *ATOTC* (which was never in fact performed), see Michael Slater, "'The Bastille Prisoner": A Reading Dickens Never Gave', *Études anglaises*, 23 (1970), 190–6.

For the next 150 years, the French tale has been one of neglect.²² *David Copperfield* has gone into scores of French translations and versions since its publication in French; *A Tale of Two Cities* has scarcely reached double figures. Comically symptomatic of the failure of the novel to capture the national imagination has been an almost pathological inability to agree on a title for it in French. From the outset, the literal translation – *Un conte de deux villes* – was rejected, presumably on grounds of dysphonia (that ugly ‘de deux’), and for most of its history, it traded under the title *Paris et Londres en 1793*. The difficulty of finding a way to treat the novel sympathetically is also evident in the frequent omission of the opening and closing lines of the novel. An English-language version of the novel without ‘best of times, worst of times’ and ‘far, far better thing’ would be viewed as an evisceration of a national treasure.²³ In France, such cuts have been par for the course.

In one way it is supremely easy to understand the negativity of French responses. For the images that the novel presents of the French Revolution, and notably of the Reign of Terror in 1793 when it climaxes, are notoriously negative. Dickens presents his tale as a parable in which ‘myriads of small creatures, the creatures of this chronicle among the rest’ (*ATOTC*, 7) face up to and survive an oppressive and terroristic foreign regime.²⁴ The most sympathetic French characters are in fact naturalised Englishmen: notably Doctor Manette, imprisoned in the Bastille under the Ancien Régime, before beginning life anew in London’s Soho; and Charles Darnay, nephew and heir of the marquis de Evrémonte, the latter an aristocrat of a gratuitous viciousness rarely found outside the pages of Jean-Paul Marat. Darnay thwarts the bloodlust of the ghastly Madame Defarge – probably in fact the least unsympathetic French character in the book (though this is certainly not saying much) – and is rescued from the guillotine and spirited back to London with his wife, Lucy Manette, as a result of a prison cell substitution by the self-sacrificial Sydney Carton. Some of the Parisian set-piece scenes in the novel have become classics of political nightmare: the dank, dungeon chill of Manette’s cell in the Bastille; the Kafka-esque atmosphere of the Revolutionary Tribunal; the hideous account of the Carmagnole revolutionary dance, with

²² See the excellent, if now dated, article, Annie Sadrin, ‘Traductions et adaptations françaises de *A Tale of Two Cities*’, in *Charles Dickens et la France: Colloque international de Boulogne-sur-Mer, 3 juin 1978*, ed. Sylvère Monod (Lille, 1979), 77–91. Cf., extending and updating this article, Jones *et al.*, ‘Introduction’, esp. pp 7–8.

²³ Symptomatically, the first paragraph was retained virtually verbatim even in the much scaled-down reading version.

²⁴ It has been convincingly argued that Dickens was also moved in this regard by sympathy for English settlers caught up in the 1857 Indian Mutiny. Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the World of Charles Dickens* (Aldershot, 2004). Thanks to Margot Finn on this point.

tricolor-bedecked *sans-culottes* shrieking frenetically as the guillotine blade is sharpened; Madame Defarge counting the stitches in her knitting as heads fall; and the revolutionary mob 'all armed alike in hunger and revenge', 'headlong, mad and dangerous' and primed for maximum atrocity (*ATOTC*, 224, 222, 230). And hovering menacingly over it all: the grim, personalised Faubourg Saint-Antoine, home of Parisian revolutionary bloodlust, site of hunger, poverty and neglect, whose 'lords in waiting on the saintly presence' were, in Dickens's enumeration, 'cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance and want' (*ATOTC*, 32).

From the start, French audiences found *A Tale of Two Cities* difficult to stomach. The overt politics of the novel proved more than enough to offend French audiences of whatever political stripe. The Left were appalled by Dickens's blood-swilling account of radicals in the reign of Terror; while Right-wing nostalgics for the Ancien Régime were upset by the virulent representation of the aristocracy. For 150 years (and counting), French readers have shunned the novel on, evidently, the mildest and most superficial knowledge. What knowledge they do have has easily fitted into national stereotypical responses every bit as crude as the chauvinistic British reading that I have evoked. French readers have tended to prefer their Dickens full of loveable characters, jocular, quintessentially English humour, whimsical dialogue and mawkishly sentimental highspots. These benign qualities of Dickens's *œuvre* were viewed as his predominant characteristics in the respectful if condescending praise which the literary historian Hippolyte Taine accorded him from the 1860s in his canonical four-volumed *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*.²⁵ In the event, however, Dickens could not have had a more problematic literary supporter. For after the Paris Commune in 1871, Taine developed a second identity as a rabid counter-revolutionary analyst of the French Revolution in general and Parisian crowds in particular.²⁶ Ever since, Dickens's politics have been tarred with an ultra-reactionary brush in France. This has been an enduring legacy. In 2007, for example, the distinguished historian, Jean-Noël Jeanneney, went out of his way bitterly to regret the fact that French schoolchildren wanting to find out about the French Revolution on the World-Wide Web might be reduced to reading authors from

²⁵ Hippolyte Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, started to be published in 1863, being added to and going into numerous later editions. I have consulted the 1881 edition, with 5 volumes. Also on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reception in France, see Floris Delattre, *Dickens et la France: étude d'une interaction littéraire anglo-française* (Paris, 1927), and, more generally, *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, ed. Annie Sadrin (Basingstoke, 1999).

²⁶ Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (Paris, 1876–94). The volumes concerning the Ancien Régime (vol. I) and the Revolution (vols. II–IV) appeared in 1876, 1878 and 1885. For Taine, Le Bon and other analysts of crowd behaviour in this period, see Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, 1981).