

# The Heart of London

Charles Dickens and Social Reform



HEART OF LONDON, THERE IS A MORAL IN THY EVERY STROKE!  
as I look on at thy indomitable working, which neither death, nor press of life, nor grief,  
nor gladness out of doors will influence one jot, I seem to hear a voice within thee which  
sinks into my heart, bidding me, as I elbow my way among the crowd, have some thought  
for the meanest wretch that passes, and, being a man, to turn away with scorn and pride  
from none that bear the human shape.

*Master Humphrey's Clock (1840)*



THE LIFE of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) spanned much of the century transformed by the Industrial Revolution, and he witnessed the results, both positive and negative, that impacted England and especially his beloved London. Thousands of people who migrated from rural areas to the capital found a city almost entirely without social infrastructure and lacking the central organization needed to manage such urban necessities as police, fire control, water and sewage, and roads and bridges. The traditional parish oversight was quickly overwhelmed, and it would be the end of the century before many of these problems were properly addressed.

The atmosphere, however, was one of progress and the possibilities of reform. Education and therefore literacy were seen as the means to improve the lives of the masses, and the mechanization of printing provided the means to distribute an increasing amount of reading material. The periodical press boomed, generating dailies, weeklies and monthlies that distributed fiction and non-fiction to a voracious reading public.

In this context, Dickens and other authors began to make use of the novel to explore social reform by raising awareness of poverty, crime, injustice, and ignorance, skewering the pompous and the arrogant, and humanizing those whose lives of quiet desperation were easily overlooked.

*Master Humphrey's Clock*. With Illustrations by George Cattermole and Hablot Browne. London: Chapman and Hall, 1840-1841. 3 vols. (triple decker)

## ***SKETCHES BY BOZ***

He describes London like a special correspondent for posterity.

*Walter Bagehot (1858)*

Dickens began his writing career as a reporter, first in the ecclesiastical court and then in Parliament. Some short pieces written for the periodical press were then collected into his first book, *Sketches by Boz* (his childhood nickname), combining his journalistic eye, sardonic humor and thorough knowledge of London. His first-hand understanding of London's sprawling tapestry continued to provide both inspiration and primary setting throughout his writing career.

*Sketches by Boz. (The Nonesuch Dickens, vol. 22). Bloomsbury [London]: The Nonesuch Press, 1937-1938.*

The Nonesuch Press limited edition of Dickens' collected works was based on the 1867 publications by Chapman & Hall, the last of the editions to be corrected by the author and so known as the "Charles Dickens Edition." Nonesuch Press used the original woodblock and steel plates from Chapman & Hall to produce this edition in 1937, and included a steel plate in each set.

*Black's Guide to London and Its Environs.* Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1863. The map reproduced on the cover of this booklet is from a pocket in the back of Black's Guide.

## ***OLIVER TWIST***

Eleven or twelve years have elapsed since the description [of Jacob's Island, a London slum] was first published. I was as well convinced then, as I am now, that nothing effectual can be done for the elevation of the poor in England, until their dwelling-places are made decent and wholesome. I have always been convinced that this reform must precede all other Social Reforms; that it must prepare the way for Education, even for Religion; and that, without it, those classes of the people which increase the fastest, must

become so desperate, and be made so miserable, as to bear within themselves the certain seeds of ruin to the whole community.

*Preface to Oliver Twist, the First Cheap Edition (1850)*

In his second novel, (following the comic *Pickwick Papers*), Dickens combined his knowledge of London's dark corners with his outrage over the New Poor Law of 1834 and a typically Victorian sentiment toward childhood. The result was one of his most popular novels, continually dramatized from its publication to the present day.

The New Poor Law of 1834 was a well-intended attempt to improve the administration of poor relief, but the result was a system that required those deemed unable to work to live in "workhouses," where families and spouses were separated and subject to prison-like conditions, and where those deemed able to work were denied any assistance at all. Reports of appalling conditions, corruption, and inept management, along with periodic attempts to revise and improve the law, persisted throughout the century. Dickens was one of the law's outspoken critics, using literary characters like Oliver to humanize the problem and expand awareness.

To critics who claimed the novel glamorized the criminal classes, Dickens responded in the preface to the third edition: "What manner of life is that which is described in these pages, as the everyday existence of a Thief? ... The cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things? Have they no lesson, and do they not whisper something beyond the little-regarded warning of a moral precept?"

*Oliver Twist, Chapter One*, in *Bentley's Miscellany* [London : Richard Bentley] v.1 (1837). Edited by Dickens; illustrations by George Cruikshank.

The beginning of the original serial publication, which ran monthly to 1839.

*Oliver Twist*. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1839.

First illustrated American ed., redrawn from Cruikshank's plates.

Original steel engraving plate of George Cruikshank's illustration for "*Oliver escapes being bound apprentice to the Sweep*", from the 1867 Chapman and Hall "Charles Dickens Edition." (Included in the Nonesuch Dickens, 1937.)

Henry Brougham, Baron Brougham and Vaux. "Speech on moving the second reading of the bill to amend the Poor Laws, delivered in the House of Lords, July 21, 1834," in *Speeches of Henry, Lord Brougham, upon Questions Relating to Public Rights, Duties, and Interests*. Vol. 2 (of 2 vols). Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1841.

James Grant. *Sketches in London*. Illustrations by "Phiz," and others. London: W.S. Orr, 1838.

J. Ewing Ritchie. *The Night Side of London*. London: W. Tweedie, 1857.

## ***LITTLE DORRIT***

The philosophy of the law of Debtor and Creditor demonstrates that to be poor is to be punishable.

*Douglas Jerrold (1840)*

In 1824 when Charles was 12, his father, John, was imprisoned in Marshalsea Prison for debt. The humiliation of this experience, along with his being put to work in a blacking factory as a result, still rankled decades later, long after the Marshalsea itself had ceased to exist. The injustice of such imprisonment and the labyrinthine laws governing release fueled the writing of *Little Dorrit* and his scathing description of the Circumlocution Office, an all-too-recognizable indictment of a self-serving government bureaucracy. The social prisons created by those greedy for money and position extend the metaphor to all of London, as Dickens described a world where only love provides the key to prison doors of our own making.

*Little Dorrit*. Illustrations by Hablot K. Browne (Phiz). London: Bradbury and Evans, 1857. Bound from the original parts, including wrappers.

James Grant. *Every Day Life in London*. (American ed.) Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1839.

*Heads of the People; or, Portraits of the English. Drawn by Kenny Meadows with original essays by distinguished writers.* (American ed.) Philadelphia : Carey & Hart, 1841.

John Wade, ed. *The Extraordinary Black Book: An Exposition of the United Church of England and Ireland; Civil List and Crown Revenues; Incomes, Privileges and Power, of the Aristocracy; Privy Council, Diplomatic, and Consular Establishments; Law and Judicial Administration; Representation and Prospects of Reform under the New Ministry ... The Whole Corrected from the Latest Official Returns, and Presenting a Complete View of the Expenditure, Patronage, Influence and Abuses of the Government in Church, State, Law, and Representations.* London: E. Wilson, 1831.

## ***OUR MUTUAL FRIEND***

But, that my view of the poor law may not be mistaken or misrepresented, I will state it. I believe there has been in England, since the days of the Stuarts, no law so often infamously administered, no law so often openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised.

*Postscript, Our Mutual Friend*

His last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* is a complex summation of themes and issues Dickens had addressed throughout his career (thirty years later, Dickens is still condemning the New Poor Law). The two primary metaphors are the river that flows, always changing and unchanged, through the city and the lives of its people, and the dust heaps, mounds of coal dust and cinders that were sorted and recycled, that represent the endless cycle of life to death to life.

The supply of clean water and the removal of sewage were critical to the health of growing industrial era cities and were the focus of much concern throughout the 19th century. London and many other cities, including Cincinnati, saw periodic cholera epidemics until the link between the disease and polluted water sources was understood and water better managed.

The burning of coal as the primary fuel for heating and cooking in a city the size of London resulted in vast quantities of coal dust and cinders. Contractors were paid to remove the dust and hired teams of “dustmen” to collect it. The dust was dumped in “heaps” on the outskirts of the city, in the midst of the developing suburbs. More workers sifted the heaps, looking for materials that could be resold, resulting in many contractors becoming wealthy men.

*Our Mutual Friend*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1864-1865.

Issued in parts.

William Matthews. *Hydraulia, an historical and descriptive account of the water works of London : and the contrivances for supplying other great cities, in different ages and countries*. London : Simpkin, Marshall, 1835.

Henry Mayhew. *London labour and the London poor: the condition and earnings of those that will work, cannot work, and will not work*. Vol. 2. ( of 4 vols.) London: C. Griffin [1861].

### *The Serial Novel*

It would be very unreasonable to expect that many readers, pursuing a story in portions from month to month through nineteen months, will, until they have it before them complete, perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom. Yet, that I hold the advantages of the mode of publication to outweigh its disadvantages, may be easily believed of one who revived it in the *Pickwick Papers* after long disuse, and has pursued it ever since.

*Postscript, Our Mutual Friend*

In the same way that viewers of a TV mini-series such as *Downton Abbey* must wait from week to week for the next chapter of the story, Dickens' readers had to wait from month to month for his novels to be published in the pages of a magazine. After its appearance there, each chapter was published separately in paper covers or wrappers; advertisers were quick to take advantage of this format. Finally the completed book would be published, often in the three-volume format that came to be known as the "triple decker."

A variety of these formats is held in Special Collections, demonstrating the multiple contexts in which nineteenth century readers encountered Dickens.





# The Crystal Palace & The Great Exhibition of 1851



THE CRYSTAL PALACE.

From the Serpentine.

371.

*Engraved for "Mighty London Illustrated" Rowland & Co. 25, Johnson's Court Fleet St.*

“...before we neared the Crystal Palace, the sun shone and gleamed upon the gigantic edifice, upon which the flags of every nation were flying ... The glimpse, through the iron gates of the Transept, the waving palms and flowers, the myriads of people filling the galleries and seats around, together with the flourish of trumpets as we entered the building, gave a sensation I shall never forget, and I felt much moved.”

Those were the words of Queen Victoria upon her first visit to the Great Exhibition of 1851, one of the first world’s fairs and an unprecedented spectacle made possible by the wealth and influence of the British Empire. The Exhibition was housed in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park and the event ran from May 1<sup>st</sup> through October 15<sup>th</sup>. The awe-inspiring Crystal Palace was built especially for the Exhibition, designed by Joseph Paxton, and made entirely of steel and glass.

Prince Albert, the Queen’s consort, Henry Cole and other members of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce organized the event. The dual missions of the organizers were to showcase the achievements of the Industrial Revolution in Britain as well as to stimulate the fields of art and design in Britain which had fallen behind its Continental competitors. The over 13,000 exhibitions came from around the world, including the British colonies of India, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the United States and various European nations. The Great Exhibition, and the Crystal Palace itself, were two of the greatest achievements of Queen Victoria’s reign.

“To nature alone must we look for beauty, and the nearer the approach to her creations the more striking the success.” A published catalogue compiled illustrations of the best examples of the decorative arts the Exhibition had to offer, including fine porcelain, furniture, carpets, statuary and other fine arts. Its contents represent the epitome of Victorian high design.

Over six million people visited the Exhibition and London became the center of the world for over five months in the year 1851. Crowds

descended on the city creating chaos and taxing the city's infrastructure. For one of London's most prominent citizens, Charles Dickens, the excitement proved particularly overwhelming: "I find I am 'used up' by the Exhibition. I don't say there is nothing in it: there's too much. I have only been twice, so many things bewilder one. I have a natural horror of sights, and the fusion of so many sights in one, has not decreased it. I am not sure that I have seen anything, but the Fountain, and the Amazon."

One of Dickens' frequent collaborators, the illustrator George Cruikshank, co-authored and illustrated a satirical work that described a fictional family's visit to the Exhibition, poking fun at the overcrowding of the city and the hype surrounding the event. Visitors to the Exhibition could also choose among various souvenirs of their visit, including a tunnel book depicting the inside of the Crystal Palace. Tunnel books were moveable books bound accordion style with a hole in the cover that when opened fully allow the viewer to see a three dimensional scene.

Upon entering the Crystal Palace, visitors were presented with a wide array of possibilities. Among the thematic galleries were the Pompeian Court, the Alhambra Court, the Medieval Court and the Renaissance Court. One of the most popular attractions was Rimmel's perfume fountain. Eugene Rimmel was a French perfumer who immigrated to London and founded the famous Rimmel cosmetics company.

At the conclusion of the Exhibition medals and prizes were awarded in hundreds of categories and the Royal Commission printed a report of the proceedings. The Special Collections copy was a presentation copy most likely given to one of the award winners. Among the medal winners was American Civil War photographer Mathew Brady for his innovative daguerreotypes.

Once the Exhibition ended, the Crystal Palace was rebuilt with large modifications at Sydenham, south of London, and along with its gardens

continued to be a tourist attraction from 1854 to 1936, hosting concerts, exhibits, and other public entertainments. Many official tourist guides were published during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the century, the Palace had begun to lose its luster. The Palace burnt down after a small office fire blazed out of control in 1936, prompting Winston Churchill to comment “This is the end of an age.”



INTERIOR OF THE GREAT EXHIBITION.

1851.  
South Transept.

Engraved for "Wagner's London Illustrated Guide" by P. B. Johnson and C. P. Lee.

***Exhibited Works:***

*The Art-Journal Illustrated Catalogue: The Industry of All Nations 1851.* London: Published for the proprietors by George Virtue, [1851].

*Great Exhibition. Reports by the Juries on the Subjects in the Thirty Classes into Which the Exhibition Was Divided.* London: Published for the Royal Commission by William Clowes & Sons, 1852.

*The Great London Exhibition of Industry, 1851.* London: s.n., 1851. (Tunnel book.)

Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank. *1851 or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family: Who Came Up to London to "Enjoy Themselves," and to See the Great Exhibition.* London: D. Bogue, 1851.

*The Official Illustrated Guide to the Palace and Park: Containing a Full Description of All the Art, Industrial, Natural, and Scientific Exhibitions.* London: R.K. Burt, 1870.

*The Palace and Park: Its Natural History, and Its Portrait Gallery, Together with a Description of the Pompeian Court.* Sydenham: Crystal Palace Library, 1859.

Samuel Phillips. *Guide to the Crystal Palace and Park.* London: Bradbury & Evans, 1856.

*Remembrances of the Great Exhibition: A Series of Views, Beautifully Engraved on Steel, from Drawings Made on the Spot, Including a General History of Its Origin, Progress, and Close.* Paris: H. Mandeville, 1852.

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p. [1] and 8: Mayhew, *London Laborers and the London Poor...*

Portrait, p. 2: daguerreotype by John Mayall, circa 1853.

p. 9 and 12: *Remembrances of the Great Exhibition: A Series of Views...*