The Pickwick Papers

by Ian Brinton

English Association Dickens Bookmarks
No. 2
The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club

by

Ian Brinton

The aim of this Bookmark is to show how this first novel written by Dickens laid the ground for so many of his ideas which were to be developed over the next thirty-five years: the claustrophobia and degradation of the debtor’s prison, the webbed entanglements of the law, the growing industrial society of the Midlands, religious hypocrisy and, not least, magnanimous and up-lifting good humour.

The Pickwick Papers was published by Chapman and Hall between March 1836 and November 1837. It was originally conceived as a humorous text to be published in monthly numbers of 1000 copies to accompany a series of sporting and comic illustrations by Robert Seymour who would supply four plates for each number. Interestingly the commission was first offered to Henry Mayhew, who would later publish London Labour and the London Poor in 1851, before being offered to the twenty-four year old Charles Dickens whose articles, Sketches by Boz, had appeared to great acclaim in various periodicals. When he accepted Chapman & Hall’s proposal Dickens made it clear that Seymour should illustrate his text rather than him providing some description to accompany the sporting illustrations. The publishers agreed in February 1836 and the young Dickens was very much given his own head in the enterprise. In fact he only met Seymour once, in April, and that meeting involved a major disagreement concerning the illustrator’s presentation of the etching for ‘The Stroller’s Tale’, the first of six digressive inset-stories that were to punctuate the novel. Robert Seymour was a well-respected comic artist and he may well have felt that his idea of a series of plates illustrating the misadventures of a sporting ‘Nimrod’ club was being hijacked by the unbridled enthusiasm of this new man-of-the moment. What is certain is that Seymour committed suicide after re-doing ‘The Dying Clown’ plate and Dickens appointed a young man, Hablot K. Browne (Phiz), to take his place thus beginning an association of novelist and book illustrator that was to last for over twenty years.

Pickwick and the Eighteenth Century

What is most significant about The Pickwick Papers is the manner in which Dickens begins with a world that owes much to the Eighteenth Century picaresque tradition and goes on to develop a sense of thematic unity and characterisation which will provide a platform for much of his later work. The debt to Dickens’s early reading of both Fielding and Smollett was recognised in June 1836 by the review in the Sunday Times which highlighted these connections and a sketch of the various journeys made by Samuel Pickwick recalls the movement around England in both Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. In chapters nine and ten Pickwick and Wardle give pursuit to the eloping Jingle and Wardle’s spinster sister, Rachel, who have hired a chaise from the Blue Lion in Muggleton; they arrive at the White Heart in the Borough district just south of the Thames where they meet up with Sam Weller; in chapter sixteen Pickwick and Weller take a stage coach to the Angel in Bury-St.-Edmunds; in chapter twenty-two Pickwick and Weller take the coach to Ipswich; in chapter thirty-five the Pickwickians take the coach from the White Horse Cellar in London to Bath. In addition there are visits to Bristol and Dorking as well as to Birmingham. However, the picaresque style of this movement is not the only echo of the Eighteenth Century. The novel opens with a suggestive connection between fiction and fact which predates the world of the Victorian novel:

We have no official statement of the facts which the reader will find recorded in the next chapter, but they have been carefully collated from letters and other
MS. authorities, so unquestionably genuine as to justify their narration in a connected form.

This appeal to historical accuracy is taken up in chapter four where there is a reference ‘to the notebook of Mr. Snodgrass’ to which we are ‘indebted for the particulars recorded in this, and the succeeding chapter’. Another clear echo of the Augustan age can be found in the personification of the sun that opens chapter two of the novel:

That punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven, when Mr. Samuel Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers, threw open his chamber window, and looked out upon the world beneath.

Perhaps the clearest association with the world of Fielding can be seen in the ironic absurdity of the pompous man who takes it upon himself to deliver a moral lesson to others just before finding himself in a position which is in itself compromising. Towards the end of *Joseph Andrews*, Parson Adams chastises Joseph for setting too much store by his affection for another person:

"Now, believe me, no Christian ought so to set his heart on any person or thing in this world, but that whenever it shall be required, or taken from him in any manner by divine Providence, he may be able peaceably, quietly, and contentedly to resign it."

At which words one came hastily in, and acquainted Mr. Adams that his youngest son was drowned. He stood silent a moment, and soon began to stamp about the room, and deplore his loss with the bitterest agony.

By contrast in chapter eighteen of *Pickwick* the ‘Founder of the Pickwick Club’ confronts his members concerning their dalliance with ladies:

"Is it not a wonderful circumstance," said Mr. Pickwick, "that we seem destined to enter no man's house without involving him in some degree of trouble? Does it not, I ask, bespeak the indiscretion, or, worse than that, the blackness of heart—that I should say so!—of my followers, that, beneath whatever roof they locate, they disturb the peace of mind and happiness of some confiding female?"

It is, of course, at this very moment that news arrives of Mr. Pickwick himself being taken to court ‘for a breach of promise of marriage’ consequent upon Mrs. Bardell fainting in his arms!

**Fogg and the Law**

The warmth of atmosphere that acts as a backdrop to the comic adventures of the members of the Pickwick Club, a warmth that is located particularly in the good humour and hospitality of Wardle’s family in Dingley Dell as well as in the irrepressible solidity of Weller Senior, shifts its tone in chapter twenty. As Edmund Wilson puts it in ‘Dickens: The Two Scrooges’:

Mr. Pickwick has been framed by Dodson and Fogg, and very soon—another wronged man—he will land in the debtors’ prison, where a good many of the other characters will join him and where the whole book will deepen with a new dimension of seriousness.

The opening of chapter twenty presents the reader with a scene that anticipates not only the life-destroying world of Chancery, the all-pervasive fog that dominates *Bleak House*, but also
with an image that Dickens was to return to in *Hard Times* where the guileless Stephen Blackpool lies at the bottom of a disused mine-shaft:

In the ground-floor of a dingy house, at the very furthest end of Freeman’s Court, Cornhill, sat the four clerks of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg, two of his Majesty’s Attorneys of the Courts of King’s Bench and Common Pleas at Westminster, and solicitors of the High Court of Chancery: the aforesaid clerks catching as favourable glimpses of Heaven’s light and Heaven’s sun, in the course of their daily labours, as a man might hope to do, were he placed at the bottom of a reasonably deep well; and without the opportunity of perceiving the stars in the day-time, which the latter secluded situation affords.

The satirical sense of the house being associated with the ‘end’ of ‘Freeman’s Court’ is merged with that of the spiders which live at the bottom of a ‘dingy’ area waiting to catch their prey within the webs of language hinted at by the use of the word ‘aforesaid’. The description of Dodson and Fogg’s office anticipates the ‘dark and dirty chambers’ of the Lawyers’ Clerks which are ‘scattered about, in various holes and corners of the Temple’ in chapter thirty-one:

These sequestered nooks are the public offices of the legal profession, where writs are issued, judgements signed, declarations filed, and numerous other ingenious machines put in motion for the torture and torment of His Majesty’s liege subjects, and the comfort and emolument of the practitioners of the law. They are, for the most part, low-roofed, mouldy rooms, where innumerable rolls of parchment, which have been perspiring in secret for the last century, send forth an agreeable odour, which is mingled by day with the scent of dry rot, and by night with the various exhalations which arise from damp cloaks, festering umbrellas, and the coarsest tallow candles.

The sinister suggestion of the predator waiting for its prey is hinted at not only by the living sense of the parchment which perspires secretly but also by the infectious nature of the dry rot which will undermine everything. This image will, of course, recur in *Little Dorrit* where the Clennam house is slowly rotting away before falling down as well as in the ‘black, dilapidated street’ of *Bleak House’s* Tom-all-Alone’s, where the ‘tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery’:

As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in...

However, in this first novel the deflating good humour of the irrepressible Sam Weller is more dominant in the end than the webs of law and one of the finest moments in the case of Bardell versus Pickwick comes when the loyal servant, the Sancho Panza to a modern-day Quixote, is being cross-examined by the prosecuting Serjeant Buzfuz. When asked about his visit to Mrs. Bardell and what was said upon that occasion about the forthcoming case he replies:

‘Arter a few unimportant observations from the two virtuous females as has been examined here to-day, the ladies gets into a very great state o’ admiration at the honourable conduct of Mr. Dodson and Fogg—them two gen’l’men as is settin’ near you now.’ This, of course, drew general attention to Dodson and Fogg, who looked as virtuous as possible. ‘The attorneys for the plaintiff,’ said Mr. Serjeant Buzfuz. ‘Well! They spoke in high praise of the honourable conduct of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg, the attorneys for the plaintiff, did they? ‘Yes,’ said Sam, ‘they said what a wery gen’rous thing it was o’ them to have taken up the case on spec, and to charge nothing at all for costs, unless they got ‘em out of
Mr. Pickwick.’ At this very unexpected reply, the spectators tittered again, and Dodson and Fogg, turning very red, leant over to Serjeant Buzfuz, and in a hurried manner whispered something in his ear.

The Debtor’s Prison

In early 1824 John Dickens was arrested for debt and incarcerated in the Marshalsea Prison near the Borough, and the effects of the debt were felt in the Dickens household as most of the furniture was pawned before the family moved into the prison to remain together. The twelve year-old Charles Dickens, lodging nearby, was a regular visitor to the prison, dividing his time between there and the blacking warehouse. Edgar Johnson suggests that ‘All the rest of his emotional life he lay under the shadow of this lost love, which in its darkest places merges with the shadow cast by the spiked wall of the Marshalsea and the imprisoning shades of the blacking warehouse.’ This early experience may well account for what Johnson refers to as the writer’s ‘lifelong preoccupation with prisons.’

In chapter twenty-one we are presented with a view of the Marshalsea, the prison that was to dominate the later Little Dorrit, as a place of ‘poverty and debauchery’ where ‘want and misfortune are pent up in the narrow prison’. The speaker is an old man who is recounting one of the inset tales about ‘The Queer Client’: a story of debt, revenge and hopelessness. He sees the prison as having ‘an air of gloom and dreariness’ which ‘impart to it a squalid and sickly hue’ and he presents his hearers with a portrait of a man who could easily be an early version of William Dorrit:

A man has confidence in untried friends, he remembers the many offers of service so freely made by his boon companions when he wanted them not; he has hope—the hope of happy inexperience—and however he may bend beneath the first shock, it springs up in his bosom, and flourishes there for a brief space, until it droops beneath the blight of disappointment and neglect. How soon have those same eyes, deeply sunken in the head, glared from faces wasted with famine, and sallow from confinement, in days when it was no figure of speech to say that debtors rotted in prison, with no hope of release, and no prospect of liberty! The atrocity in its full extent no longer exists, but there is enough of it left to give rise to occurrences that make the heart bleed.

When Pickwick is incarcerated in the Fleet Prison the reader is under no misapprehensions about the sordid reality of this situation. A popular account of Newgate had appeared in Pierce Egan’s Life in London (1821) where three picaresque men-about-town visit the condemned yard:

It is a truly afflicting scene; and neither the PEN nor the PENCIL, however directed by talent, can do it adequate justice, or convey a description of the “harrowed feelings” of the few spectators that are admitted into the Condemned Yard upon such an occasion.

Egan’s writing, illustrated by the brothers Cruikshank, presents the reader with a comfortably unconvincing account of prisoners:

It is really astonishing, upon most of these occasions, to witness the resignation and fortitude with which these unhappy men conduct themselves: many of the most hardened and desperate offenders, from the kindness, attention, and soothing conduct of the Rev. Mr COTTON, who is indefatigable in administering consolation to their troubled minds, have become the most sincere penitents.

A comparison with Dickens’s account in chapter forty-one of Pickwick is a register of how far the young novelist has moved into the world of realism:
It was getting dark; that is to say, a few gas jets were kindled in this place which was never light, by way of compliment to the evening, which had set in outside. As it was rather warm some of the tenants of the numerous little rooms which opened into the gallery on either hand, had set their doors ajar. Mr. Pickwick peeped into them as he passed along, with great curiosity and interest. Here four or five great hulking fellows, just visible through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, were engaged in noisy and riotous conversation over half-emptied pots of beer, or playing on all-fours with a very greasy pack of cards.

In chapter forty-four a Chancery prisoner is ‘discharged’ in a style that foreshadows the death of Gridly in Bleak House:

‘There is no air here,’ said the sick man faintly. ‘The place pollutes it. It was fresh round about, when I walked there, years ago; but it grows hot and heavy in passing these walls. I cannot breathe it.

The Chancery victim dies after twenty years ‘in this hideous grave’.

In conclusion many of the themes and characters in The Pickwick Papers will reappear in more developed forms later on in Dickens’s development as a novelist. The religious hypocrisy of the Shepherd, Stiggins, will re-emerge in the drunken Melchisedech Howler in Dombey and Son and the oily Chadband in Bleak House. Young Master Bardell is referred to by Sam Weller as ‘my hinfant fernomenon’ a title to be ascribed in Nicholas Nickleby to Miss Ninetta Crummles of the travelling theatrical company. The inset story in chapter six, ‘The Convict’s Return’, will form a central part of Great Expectations and the fears of young Master Bardell who is placed in ‘a commanding position’ in court reminds one of Pip’s fears and guilt in that later novel. Young Bardell ‘had certain inward misgivings that the placing him within the full glare of the judge’s eye was only a formal prelude to his being immediately ordered away for instant execution, or for transportation beyond the seas, during the whole term of his natural life, at the very least.’ By 1860 the young Pip had become ‘fearfully sensible of the great convenience that the Hulks were handy for me.’

Further Reading

Life in London or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, esq. and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian in their Rambles and Spree through the Metropolis, 1821 by Pierce Egan;
Dickens and Crime, 1962 by Philip Collins;
Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, 1952 by Edgar Johnson.