

## REVIEW ESSAY

### RECENT STUDIES OF DICKENS

HAZEL MACKENZIE

**Sabine Clemm.** *Dickens, Journalism and Nationhood: Mapping the World in Household Words*. Studies in Major Literary Authors. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 260. \$100.00.

**Catherine Waters.** *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods*. The Nineteenth Century Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. Pp. 190. £50.00.

In the *Victorian Periodical Review's* celebratory issue of its 40th anniversary last year, Rosemary Van Arsdel commented on the wasteland that once was Victorian periodicals scholarship. Today few would doubt the view of what was then only a determined minority, that nineteenth-century periodicals offered a unique and important window into Victorian culture. Sabine Clemm's *Dickens, Journalism and Nationhood: Mapping the World in Household Words* and Catherine Waters's *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* provide just such a window, examining one of the most famous of Victorian periodicals, Charles Dickens's *Household Words*.

From 1850 to 1859 *Household Words* instructed and entertained its audience through its discussion of the social questions of the day. Known for its imaginative non-fiction prose, it gained a circulation of 40,000 at its height. The fame of its editor or its 'conductor', as Dickens preferred to be known, has meant that *Household Words* has received more attention than other similar periodicals of the time. Yet Anne Lohri's ground-breaking work in documenting its contents and contributors went for many years without a proper follow-up. As both Clemm and Waters note, no book-length study has until now been devoted to either *Household Words* or Dickens's other weekly periodical *All the Year Round*. Despite the belief that periodicals can provide a window into the culture of the period, periodical scholarship has tended to be author-driven and no more so than in relation to Dickens's journals. Clemm and Waters seek to move away from this mode of criticism to treat the periodical as 'an independent and complex entity in its own

right, a multifarious and often contradictory production of meaning' (Clemm 2).

Clemm and Waters both ground their work on Benedict Anderson's conception of the periodical audience as an imagined, although not imaginary, community of readers united by the mass ceremony of newspaper or magazine reading. They cast the periodical genre not just as reflection but as an active agent in the construction of Victorian identities. This is integral to both works. The interest of both Clemm and Waters in the journal as 'an extremely complex assemblage of important journalism' (Waters 6) is matched by their interest in its mediating power of the culture of the day. Thus Clemm and Waters focus on the cultural implications of the texts that they uncover, bringing to life not just forgotten texts but also the world in which these texts lived and breathed. For books that both cite the name of Dickens in their title, we read very little about either the man or his writing. While this makes for a refreshing change in critical approach and allows the authors more scope to explore these journals as the multi-vocal and heterogeneous entities that they were, it does tend to obscure the hands-on role Dickens played as editor, and the muddled complexities of authorship and authority that result from the collective enterprise of publishing a periodical. Dickens's relative absence, however, allows for the authors to provide a greater sense of the journal as a whole. The greatest strength of both books is the wealth of the material uncovered, the myriad of extracts examined to give the colour and life often missing from periodical studies. While this exploration of the richness of the source material occasionally overshadows the authors' respective theses, it more than makes up for it in terms of the insights gained both small and large from the depth of their textual analysis.

Clemm's study of the often contradictory depiction of national identity in the pages of *Household Words* makes use of a multiplicity of new material. Opening with an analysis of the journal's coverage of the Great Exhibition in 1851, Clemm takes us through the journal's treatment of Ireland, the Continent, India and the Colonies as well as the English/British question and the concept of 'Unenglish'. As a journal *Household Words* displayed a keen interest in the relationship between England and the rest of the world. Foreign travel, the Empire and what it meant to be English were subjects frequently covered in its pages. Moreover, as Clemm demonstrates, its explicit mission was to transcend social boundaries and to form a unified, homogenous, national community in its readership. Key to the formation of this community was its depiction of other countries and cultures. But this treatment of other cultures is not as simple as it might at first appear. Clemm's book

illustrates this in a wonderfully vivid style, providing a nuanced account of the various ambiguities and contradictions that emerge in the journal's treatment of the subject. Ireland's depiction as at once a colony and a part of Britain, the vacillation between the Continent as a haven of democracy and civilisation and as a seat of despotism and barbarism, and the journal's ambiguous position in relation to India, accounts of which both reinforce the sovereign/subject relationship between Britain and India and provide a critique of the Empire, are all deftly demonstrated through the analysis of an eclectic range of sources.

Of particular interest is the way in which Clemm links questions of class to that of national identity, and it could be wished that she made more of this. She writes that '*Household Words* writers directly question the nature of the English national character itself at several junctures, while the journal simultaneously endeavours to embody "English" moralities and strives to unite its readers (and, arguably, writers and producers) as one community' (3). Clemm's own analysis seems to suggest that it is the simultaneous desire to overcome yet also to cling to social hierarchies that are at the root of this prevarication, yet she seems reluctant to deal with this directly. The reader is also left to wonder where the US and Canada stand in this picture, but it is the thoroughness of Clemm's account that makes the reader wonder this, made greedy to take the exploration further. For the most part, where Clemm hits problems, they are the problems of periodical scholarship in general. The abundance of the material makes it difficult to avoid a certain sense of 'cherry-picking' while its diverse and miscellaneous nature often disrupts attempts to create a unified and sustained analysis. Book-length studies in this field and of this kind are still a relative scarcity and this is perhaps why, but as both Clemm and Waters show us with their works, there are rich gains to be made by embracing the heterogeneity of the periodical genre and the style of approach that it demands.

Moreover, Clemm's book provides not just an account of the treatment of the question of national identity of the writers and readers of *Household Words*, but with her detailed account of contemporary foreign politics, her comparison of *Household Words*'s treatment of events and topics to that of other leading journals of the day, and her analysis of events of national significance such as the Great Exhibition, relates that treatment to the wider culture, creating a work of interest to the historian of the period as well as to the literary scholar.

A similar claim could be made for Waters's book. Waters builds her work around the heterogeneous nature of the periodical genre. Focusing on '*Household Words*'s engagement with mid-Victorian commodity culture' (1), Waters covers the journal's interest in a wide range of

subject matter from advertisements and fraud to travel and tourism to window-shopping and urban rambling to industry, the funeral trade and waste management. *Household Words* appeared in a period in which consumer culture was facing a massive expansion: ‘Ordinary men and women were experiencing the pleasures and pains of consumer choice on a scale hitherto unknown’ (Waters 3). Non-essential goods, now a possibility for an ever-widening section of society, became part of a semiotic economy: ‘What you owned said something not only about your disposable income, but about who you were’ (Waters 3). As part of this new burgeoning commodity culture itself, *Household Words* was vitally concerned in the social effects of these changes, and in the possibility for alienation and abstraction that it presented. Persons and things formed a ‘strange kinship’ in its pages, as they are found to be interchangeable, both resembling and not resembling each other (Waters 5). The transformation of the consumer good from the product of industrial process and labour to a sign of the consumer’s identity was a subject of recurring concern, as was the homogenisation caused by the mass-production of goods, particularly items of clothing. For Waters, however, the disquiet that the writers express in their explorations of this new social life of goods is balanced by their joy in imaginative possibilities it provided their prose. As with Clemm, Waters excels in bringing the imaginative and evocative nature of this journalism to light, making for an enjoyably dense account of both the fear and the delight with which the various contributors to *Household Words* viewed the consumerism that was encroaching upon their culture.

Beyond this, what stands out about the book is Waters’s readable and intriguing discussion of a variety of concepts from ‘thing theory’ and consumerism to authenticity and fraud, which not only illuminates the texts that Waters discusses but provides a more general commentary on mid-Victorian culture on a larger scale. Chapters on second-hand clothing and fraudulent practices such as quackery and spiritualism, as well on the urban spectator, provide a street-level view of mid-Victorian London in all its splendour and barbarity. Chapters on the relation of this consumer community to the industrial realities of northern England and to the British Empire give this street-level view a sense of panorama. Thus, as with Clemm’s book, this book will be of interest to the literary scholar and cultural historian alike.

Overall then, what we can take from these works is a sense of the riches that the study of nineteenth-century periodical literature opens up both for the cultural historian and the literary scholar. Far as we might have come from the wasteland that Van Arsdel looks back upon, we still have a way to go. The works of Clemm and Waters are a welcome

development. There are of course problems with both these works, the need for a more sustained linking of the individual chapters to the central argument being the most pressing. But this is in part a result of the material that the authors are working with, its heterogeneity and its diversity, the flipside of which is the array of fresh insight and wonderfully colourful examples which these books provide. Well-written and thoroughly researched, these works represent a new advancement in the study of the Victorian periodical.