



Charles Dickens: Celebrity Author *The American Tour*

In December 1867, Charles Dickens embarked on a 19-week tour of America, taking in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC and other towns in the eastern states.

This was his second visit to the USA, but the first, 25 years earlier, had not been an unqualified success. Dickens had arrived in the States in 1842 with great expectations of this young republic. He met fellow writers, Longfellow and Edgar Allen Poe, and at first enjoyed an enthusiastic reception from his American readers. But these feelings quickly soured and he returned home disillusioned.

By 1867 his fame had grown tremendously, both in Britain and across the Atlantic – he was one of the first ‘celebrity authors’ who attracted thousands of fans to his readings.

Lucinda Hawksley is the author of the book Charles Dickens.

LUCINDA AMERICA 1

Charles Dickens went to America twice and he had a very kind of love hate relationship with the country. He went first of all 1842 with his young wife Catherine. It was early on in their marriage, they had 4 small children who they left behind in England and they were this young, fated couple.

Charles Dickens at the time was just thirty and Catherine and he travelled around north America and Canada, he acted, he did performances, public speeches and things and they were really lionised and they came back to England he wrote two books that infuriated America, particularly the people that felt that they had been very hospitable to him as they had been. The novel was Martin Chuzzlewit, but he also wrote a travelogue called ‘American Notes’ and in much of it he is praising America but he also wrote very cravingly about a couple of things including amongst them the American habit of chewing tobacco and spitting on the streets but the most important thing was that the fact he wrote about slavery and he had been appalled to witness first hand slavery and even more appalled when an American had genuinely asked him what do you think of our domestic institution and people in America were very very angry about some of his negative comments.

When early sales of his serialised Martin Chuzzlewit were disappointing, Dickens responded by changing the plot, sending his titular character to America. It allowed him to draw on his experience there. He portrayed the United States as uncivilised, and full of buffoons and hucksters.

READING ONE: MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

Some trifling excitement prevailed upon the very brink and margin of the land of liberty; for an alderman had been elected the day before; and party feeling naturally running rather high on such an exciting occasion, the friends of the disappointed candidate had found it necessary to assert the great principles of Purity of Election and Freedom of Opinion by breaking a few legs and arms, and furthermore pursuing one obnoxious gentleman through the streets with the design of slitting his nose. These good-humoured little outbursts of the popular fancy were not in themselves sufficiently remarkable to create any great stir, after the lapse of a whole night; but they found fresh life and notoriety in the breath of the news-boys.

"Here's this morning's New York Sewer!" cried one. "Here's this morning's New York Stabber! Here's the New York Family Spy! Here's the New York Private Listener! Here's the New York Peeper! Here's the New York Plunderer! Here's the New York Keyhole Reporter! Here's the New York Rowdy Journal! Here's all the New York papers! Here's full particulars of the

patriotic locofoco movement yesterday, in which the Whigs was so chewed up; and the last Alabama gouging case; and the interesting Arkansas dool with Bowie knives. Here's the papers, here's the papers!"

It took 25 years for him to return to the United States, but when he did most Americans appear to have forgotten their faltering start with the great Dickens. Lauded wherever he went, it was at times a disconcerting experience for him. He was frequently mobbed, hounded by the 'paparazzi' of the day and fans wanting a lock of his hair or a cutting from his fur coat.

Lucinda Hawksley again.

LUCINDA FAME

He was one of the few people who was instantly recognisable and it was said that when he was in France one year, he and Prince Albert happened both to be in France at the same time the royal yacht was in and Charles Dickens passed prince Albert walking and the two men doffed their hats to each other, but this is amazing the Queen's consort recognised Dickens as a fellow celebrity, is the world that we would use today although it was not widely used then.

Dickens author and expert, Professor Malcolm Andrews.

MALCOLM ANDREWS AMERICA

The American tour was very exciting for Dickens it brought him audiences of colossal numbers in very large halls. People were fascinated by actually seeing Dickens himself on stage but also the experience of listening to him recreating his characters for him, but he set up a hideously punishing tour schedule.

Dickens was by this point not a well man. Yet he felt compelled to go on. Reading brought in much better money than book sales and Dickens was desperate to earn. He had a growing number of dependants. So the tour went ahead.

MALCOLM ANDREWS – DICKENS ILL

It is possible that he had had one or two minor strokes and he had great difficulty sometimes dragging himself to the platform, sometimes he lost his voice but managed to recover it just as he went on stage, in fact it acted like a kind of therapy for him, being on stage because as his tour manager would see him about half an hour before and think how on earth is he every going to get up there and had nothing to eat all day except an egg beaten up and a glass of sherry, how on earth is he going to go through with two hours of reading and Dickens probably wondered the same thing but five minutes in he was suddenly strengthened fortified by this communion with that readership, his voice improved and he was spellbinding.

David Copperfield proved to be Dickens's most difficult novel to adapt for his readings, as he wanted to preserve the developing narrative, not just showcase a single scene or character. In the American tour, he gave the Copperfield reading as a six-chapter performance that lasted an hour and a half. Chapter six was one of his tour de force readings, describing the storm at Yarmouth.

READING TWO: DAVID COPPERFIELD

In the difficulty of hearing anything but wind and waves, and in the crowd, and the unspeakable confusion, and my first breathless efforts to stand against the weather, I was so confused that I looked out to sea for the wreck, and saw nothing but the foaming heads of the great waves. A half-dressed boatman, standing next me, pointed with his bare arm (a tattoo'd arrow on it, pointing in the same direction) to the left. Then, O great Heaven, I saw it, close in upon us!

One mast was broken short off, six or eight feet from the deck, and lay over the side, entangled in a maze of sail and rigging; and all that ruin, as the ship rolled and beat - which she did without a moment's pause, and with a violence quite inconceivable - beat the side as if it would stave it in. But a great cry, which was audible even above the wind and water, rose from the shore at this moment; the sea, sweeping over the rolling wreck, made a clean breach, and carried men, spars, casks, planks, bulwarks, heaps of such toys, into the boiling surge.

In some towns, thousands were turned away from his sell-out shows, and the takings were immense. In New York people queued for hours in the freezing snow to get tickets. But in private, Dickens family were worried about him.

Lucinda Hawksley again.

LUCINDA – AMERICA 2

He was fairly long separated from his wife by this point; the separation had been almost ten years. He was estranged or had been estranged from his oldest son for quite some time. He was generally not talked about in quite such glowing terms as he had been before and he'd been desperate to take his mistress Ellen Turner out to America with him and he was persuaded this would be the worst PR move possible. He went there lonely, missing his children, missing his lover, missing his friends and he found life quite difficult while he was out there.

Dickens needed the love and nourishment of his audience more than ever. The crowds who turned out to see him made him feel like a great star, and this no doubt kept him going, elating him while at the same time draining his energy.

For Professor Malcolm Andrews, the public readings gave Dickens the opportunity to take the personal relationship he had with his readers to another level.

MALCOLM ANDREWS – CONTINUITY

I think that there's a good argument for seeing the readings as very much a continuity because Dickens in his writings right from the start had in mind forging a particular relationship with his reading public, really quite an intimate one and unlike any other writers and in order to do this he held to the serial mode of publishing his fiction because he wanted that monthly contact with his reading public, he wanted to know that vicariously he was going into the homes of thousands and thousands of people every month and he said at one point in a preface to one of his books to his readership, 'for me to commune with you in any form is a labour of love' and I think that phrase to commune with you in any form opens the way for the readings and the readings are another mode of publishing his novels, except that it's the author doing it directly.

In America – as in Britain – one of Dickens's most popular characters was Toots, from *Dombey and Son*

READING THREE: DOMBEY AND SON

Mr Toots and Mr Feeder were the next arrivals. Mr Toots appeared to be involved in a good deal of uncertainty whether, on the whole, it was judicious to button the bottom button of his waistcoat, and whether, on a calm revision of all the circumstances, it was best to wear his waistbands turned up or turned down. Observing that Mr Feeder's were turned up, Mr Toots turned his up; but the waistbands of the next arrival being turned down, Mr Toots turned his down. The difference in point of waistcoat-buttoning, not only at the bottom, but at the top too, became so numerous and complicated as the arrivals thickened, that Mr Toots was continually fingering that article of dress, as if he were performing on some instrument; and appeared to find the incessant execution it demanded, quite bewildering. Mr Baps was a very grave gentleman, with a slow and measured manner of speaking; and before he had stood under the lamp five minutes, he began to talk to Toots (who had been silently comparing

pumps with him) about what you were to do with your raw materials when they came into your ports in return for your drain of gold. Mr Toots, to whom the question seemed perplexing, suggested 'Cook 'em.'

Actor and Dickens author, Simon Callow

SIMON CALLOW – LOADESTONE ROCK

When the American tour was mooted and everybody thought he really shouldn't be doing this, he said I am drawn towards it, it's my loadestone rock and that's an image from the tale of two cities where Charles Darney goes back to Paris though he knows he will certainly be imprisoned and it's a reference to the Arabian Nights where this rock has magnetic powers, it pulls all the nails out of boats so you drown immediately as you go past it. So Dickens knew in using an image like that he knew he was somehow punishing and destroying himself in some way but he had to do it.

And so, in the face of deteriorating health, the touring continued - the thrill of the show, the adoration of his fans and the lure of the money he could make, kept him returning to the platform, long after those closest to him had told him it was time to stop.