

Introduction: Dickens’ Nonfiction Prose

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Until fairly recently, it was commonplace to view the nonfiction prose of great Victorian novelists as either youthful “apprentice” work or useful background for the more creative task of dealing with the fiction. Charles Dickens, perhaps the most prolific writer and editor of nonfiction among the canonical Victorian novelists, was not immune from this critical blind spot that often defined such nonfiction prose in secondary terms. In reviewing John Drew’s *Dickens the Journalist* in 2004, Rick Allen pondered, “Is there not a danger that this [...] treatment of Dickens’ journalistic career, expressly intended *not* to focus on the relationship of the journalism to the novels, might seem like *Hamlet* without the Prince?” (246). As Drew himself notes in his authoritative study of recent work in the field that follows this Introduction, the idea of Dickens’ nonfiction writings functioning merely as the support act to the main show has begun to be questioned, especially over the last twenty or so years. In this period, the study of Dickens’ nonfiction has been facilitated by a number of practical developments: first, the publication of the *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism*, beginning in 1994, and more recently the launch of the invaluable, open-access web resource *Dickens Journals Online* in 2012. These advances have helped stimulate the growing scholarly interest in Dickens’ nonfictional prose, and publications in this area of Dickens studies have appeared steadily since.

Building on existing work in the sub-field, this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* assembles the next generation of scholarly

writing on Dickens' nonfiction. Bringing together articles by international Dickens specialists, it treats its subject in a deliberately open and wide-ranging fashion. Its focus encompasses a variety of nonfiction Dickensian texts, ranging from fresh interpretations of the frequently-discussed works of travel writing such as *American Notes* (1842) and *Pictures from Italy* (1846) to the consideration of less well-traveled paths in the journals and letters. Rather than viewing Dickens' later journalism in isolation, moreover, it provides a lively context for his popular magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, which appeared alongside the work of many other writers. The methodological and theoretical starting points of the individual essays are also diverse, from innovative approaches such as animal studies to the use of digital tools and computational literary studies that pay close, scrupulous attention to the nonfiction text. Throughout the issue, we take the view that Dickens' nonfiction is worthy of study in its own right, in isolation from the novels and short fiction, and that Dickens was one of the century's most significant writers of nonfiction prose.

This special issue begins with John Drew's comprehensive review of recent criticism of Dickens' nonfiction. In "'Humming-tops' and 'Steampunk synergies': Dickens' Journalism and Nonfiction since the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," Drew argues that Dickens' nonfiction is an important component of his creative *oeuvre* and deserves continuing scholarly attention. Drew's overview of critical commentary published during a twenty-year span through 2017 begins with a look at two major scholarly projects that have come to fruition in the past two decades: the four-volume *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism* and the launch of *Dickens Journals Online*. Drew follows his discussion with brief synopses of important reference publications, monographs devoted to Dickens' nonfiction, essays assessing authorship of journal articles, and critical commentaries. In his conclusion, Drew discusses the impact of Digital Humanities on the study of Dickens' nonfiction and makes predictions regarding future study based on the relative availability and cost of online materials that scholars may require for their work.

In "'Italy is not his ground': Dickens on the Outside in *Pictures from Italy*," Pete Orford explores the reasons for Dickens' fanciful approach to Italy, one that led a number of reviewers to criticize him for writing about topics beyond his area of expertise. Orford argues that the book has been unfairly overlooked as an oddity in the Dickens canon, too whimsical to be journalism. Orford finds that Dickens' approach was motivated not simply to avoid the political controversy inspired by the publication of *American Notes* several years earlier. Instead, it is a deliberate ploy to create a work distinct from previous travelogues of Italy, one that envelops the landscape of Italy within the abstract realm of Dickens' imagination. Dickens consistently challenges what it means to be a tourist abroad, contrasting the ideal seen by visitors with the reality experienced by the local people. The result is not a failure, but a work that blends reality and fiction and that goes beyond simple reportage to encapsulate the country's past as much as its present.

Jen Cadwallader's critique of spiritual matters in *A Child's History of England* makes a case for the topicality of Dickens' least-studied book. The years during which Dickens composed *A Child's History*, 1851 through 1853, coincide with the so-called "papal aggression," the passage of the Ecclesiastical Titles Act, and the introduction of spiritualism to England. Eighteen fifty-one was also the year of the Great Exhibition, a high note in the Victorian celebration of material and technological progress. In *A Child's History*, Cadwallader argues, these spiritual and material matters come together in surprising ways. Because Dickens depicts both the druids and Catholics as charlatans who use advanced mechanical knowledge to deceive worshippers, his *Child's History* provides a window into anxieties surrounding technology as it became more and more central to Victorians' lives in the post-Industrial world. Cadwallader finds that Dickens' portrayal of material and spiritual conflations highlights his concerns about the public's understanding of technological advancement in his own era.

Recent advances in animal studies, particularly as this new interdisciplinary field applies to literature, provide an ideological

framework for Ronald D. Morrison's "Dickens, London Zoo, and *Household Words*." Articles about and references to London Zoo – some written by Dickens and others by the magazine's regular contributors – abound in *Household Words*, especially in the early 1850s, when popular interest in the institution peaked and as the Great Exhibition opened in Hyde Park. Morrison argues that, while many of these articles deliberately celebrate British imperial power and scientific advancements, attitudes expressed in them regarding social class remain considerably more nuanced. Viewed as a whole, many of these articles from *Household Words* express concerns about the changing function of London Zoo in Victorian culture. In particular, Morrison concludes, these articles articulate a general anxiety that a popular and sentimental view of animals threatens to eclipse the scientific achievements of the Zoo and the cultural authorities that support it.

Dickens' changing views of the achievements of Baron George-Eugène Haussmann in reconstructing Paris during the 1850s and 1860s is the focus of Trey Philpotts's "Dickens, Haussmann, and the Transformation of Paris." Philpotts examines the shift in the political rhetoric surrounding ideas of centralization and authorization. In *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, Dickens and his writers felt themselves compelled to distinguish between centralization and despotism, between organized and wholesale urban planning in Paris and the repressive ruler who made it possible, Napoleon III. Initially, articles in the two journals make the case that Haussmann's centralized "improvements" typically do not signify autocratic control and restriction, but instead reflect the expansion of choice and liberation from autocratic prescriptions, and the free-flowing circulation of people and goods, reflecting Dickens' understanding of modernization and his ambivalence toward the abstraction that accompanies it. However, Philpotts concludes, by 1860 Dickens' early enthusiasm for Haussmann's changes had begun to fade, particularly as their financial and social costs became more apparent, and in light of Napoleon III's increasingly bellicose tactics in Europe.

In "Writing Letters to Come to 'Terms' with Domestic Economy," Nathalie Vanfasse mines Dickens' early letters to explain how the financial affairs of the Dickens household influenced his business life, specifically affecting his publishing contracts. Vanfasse offers a careful exposition of the financial difficulties Dickens experienced as a newly married man with a wife and growing family to support, and a fiscally profligate father whose inability to stay out of debt caused the novelist great personal *angst*. These early letters provide insight into Dickens' demanding work schedule in the 1830s; additionally, they reveal the strategies Dickens employed to develop what Vanfasse calls his "epistolary self."

In the final essay in this issue, "Language in Place: A Computational Analysis of Dickens' *American Notes*," Diana C. Archibald explains how digital analyses of literary texts can reveal hidden elements that contribute to meaning in subtle ways. Applying text mining and computational methods of analysis to *American Notes*, Archibald provides initial results showing significant structural and stylistic elements that warrant further investigation. Her preliminary study examines the following research questions: What stylistic differences can computational analysis reveal between the way different regions in *American Notes* are portrayed within the book and between *American Notes* and Dickens' other nonfiction? Second, how do these differences illuminate Dickens' attitudes toward America? Archibald argues that corpus stylistics analysis is a beneficial approach for answering these questions and for generating new perspectives on literary texts. She also outlines her methodology and initial findings in order to suggest directions for future corpus stylistics analyses of *American Notes* and Dickens' other nonfiction.

As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, writing nonfiction was for Dickens not ancillary to his 'major' work as a novelist. Instead, he saw his writing as all of a piece: a continuing critique of the society that he loved dearly but that was in great need of reform. The essays that follow contribute to the ongoing scholarly project often referred to as "Dickens Studies," and remind us of Dickens' achievements in his nonfiction.

Work Cited

Allen, Rick. Review of John M.L. Drew, *Dickens the Journalist*. *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2004), 246-48.

