

The Material and the Spiritual in Dickens’ “A Child’s History of England”

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*T*he Victorians were an anxious lot during the years Dickens was composing and publishing *A Child’s History of England* (it appeared serially in *Household Words* from 1851-53). 1850 was the year of the so-called “Papal Aggression,” when the English feared that Rome was once more trying to establish Catholic power in England. From political cartoons to public demonstrations, anti-Catholic sentiment ran high – so high, in fact, that the Ecclesiastical Titles Act was passed the following year in an attempt to void the Pope’s newly established English hierarchy of bishops. This period also corresponds roughly to the introduction of spiritualism to England: the movement began in New York in 1848, and the first séance in England was conducted in 1852. Another religion making inroads on English soil likewise invited mistrust and skepticism. Every group of eager believers attending “home circles” contained its equally eager debunkers, a role Dickens himself played.¹ The rituals of High Mass and séance seem little like one another, but both, in Dickens’ eyes, relied on the material to connect with the spiritual.

A further cause of anxiety in the early 1850s was technological advancement – a materialism of a seemingly different kind. While most applauded the steam power that made travel easier and production faster, its entry into English life was disturbing. For example, Dickens wrote in *Household Words* this description of the approach to a paper factory in 1850:

As I turn down by the hawthorn hedge into the valley, a sound comes in my ears – like the murmuring and throbbing of a mighty giant, labouring hard – that would have unbraced all the Saxon bows, and shaken all the heads off Temple Bar and London Bridge, ever lifted to those heights from the always butchering, always craving, never sufficiently-to-be-regretted, brave old English Block. It is the noise of the Steam Engine. (“A Paper Mill” 237)

Here the natural world and all of English history alike are shaken and disrupted by this new age of machinery.

In *A Child's History*, machinery and religion come together in surprising ways. In his depictions of both the druids and the Roman Church, technology becomes a tool for obfuscation and the creation of false belief. It is a connection in keeping with the time. For example, a writer for an 1853 article in the *London Illustrated News* suggests that the English, like the Britons long before them, cannot tell the difference between spiritual and material:

Railroads, steam, and electricity, and the indubitable wonders which they have wrought, have not proved powerful enough to supersede and destroy that strong innate love of the supernatural which seems implanted in the human mind. Thousands of people in Europe and America are turning tables, and obstinately refusing to believe that physical and mechanical means are in any way connected in the process. (qtd Noakes 26)

Dickens' portrayal of material and spiritual conflations in *A Child's History of England* highlights his concerns about the public's understanding of technological advancement in his own era.

I. The Druids

William Holman Hunt's *A Converted English Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* (1850) fairly well sums up English feelings toward the druids at midcentury. The painting stresses the menace posed by the druids to Britain's first Christians. The eponymous

family is placed in the foreground of the painting, huddled in a rudimentary hut whose two windows form a diptych for viewing the scene without. The left frame is focused on a typical arch-druid, robed in white, with arm outstretched toward a fleeing missionary, as below him, the line of his arm is echoed ominously in an archer's drawn bow. The two lines move us into the right panel, populated by a mob of pursuers racing in front of a henge. These figures, in turn, lead out of the hut's frame to complete the line begun by the arch-druid, Hunt's use of a disembodied arm (belonging to a pursuer hidden by the hut's wall) grasping the beleaguered missionary. The arch-druid, then, symbolizes power over the masses, and a direct threat to early Christianity.

The fascination and dread figured in this depiction of the druids is echoed in numerous history books written for nineteenth-century children. George Craik's *The Pictorial History of England* (1838) colorfully refers to the druids as "ghostly judges" about whose judicial proceedings "little or nothing is known" (82). Similarly, Elizabeth Penrose's *A History of England* (1823) hints at information about the druids her child readers are not yet ready for: "Many strange things are told of the Druids, and you shall read the account of them when you are older" (7). What better way to excite a child's curiosity? When not shrouding them in mystery, Penrose and Craik stress the druids' influence and control. "These Druids were the priests and lawgivers of the Britons, and were held by them in the greatest respect" (5), writes Penrose, while Craik elaborates that the druids "were possessed of very great power among the rude Britons, almost, it would appear, as much as was possessed by the Egyptian priesthood; insomuch that the government among the ancient Britons was more properly a theocracy than either a monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy" (82). Lady Maria Callcott's *Little Arthur's History of England* (1835) expands on this idea of druidical power, locating it not in the Britons' pagan beliefs as Craik does, but in hoarded, secret knowledge. The druids, she writes, "knew how to cure sick people, by giving them different parts of the plants that grew in the woods; and if they were burnt, or cut, they made salves to heal them; and they would not teach the common people how to use these things of themselves, so everybody was obliged to go to them for help" (4). Here, knowledge

hoarding creates a two-class system with the druids free to rule over their ignorant fellow Britons, an idea that Dickens homes in on in *A Child's History*.

Penrose may have recommended her child readers wait until they were older to learn the dreadful things said about the druids; Dickens had no such respect for childish delicacy. In fact, he was probably nearer the truth in suspecting that children's tastes were fairly well summed up by Wilkie Collins's *Gooseberry*, taking in a crime scene:

"Robbery!" whispered the boy, pointing, in high delight, to the empty box.

"You were told to wait downstairs," I said. "Go away!"

"And Murder!" added *Gooseberry*, pointing, with a keener relish still, to the man on the bed. (*Moonstone* 447)

Dickens himself seemed almost childishly delighted with the opportunity to chronicle England's salacious past, writing to William Henry Wills, "I send the History of England – with a very pretty bit in it, describing the drowning of the son of Henry the First" (*Letters* 6: 448). It is unsurprising then, that with enough sensation to fill a penny dreadful Dickens describes the druids' ceremonies as "[including] the sacrifice of human victims, the torture of some suspected criminals, and, on particular occasions, even the burning alive, in immense wicker cages, of a number of men and animals together" (132). Undoubtedly, this was the kind of material to set his young readers' imaginations on fire.

Dickens' dark view of the druids encompassed more than just censure for their treatment of human life and the sanguinary nature of their system of justice; he ties the power they held over the lives and deaths of their countrymen to sinister, deceptive quasi-religious practices. Expanding on Craik's comparison of the druids to the Egyptian priesthood, Dickens writes, "Most of its ceremonies were kept secret by the priests [...] who pretended to be enchanters, and who carried magicians' wands, and wore, each of them, about his neck, what he told the ignorant people was a Serpent's egg in a golden case" (132). The druids' mysticism, Dickens suggests here, is maintained through the spectacle they create. He undermines the idea of a

sacred priesthood with references to "enchanters" and "magicians," terms which to Dickens' audience would have invoked the increasingly popular figure of the traveling secular showman filling town halls, or the street conjuror, busking for pennies.² Simon During argues that this terminology carried a negative connotation:

The meanings of apparently celebratory magic adjectives like 'charming,' 'entrancing,' 'fascinating,' 'prestigious,' 'glamorous' are not totally opposed to those rarer terms which highlight magic's spuriousness [...] magic terms refer back to illusions and dangerous power, to the otherness of the vernacular magic domain. (40)

Dickens certainly would have had this in mind as he drew his comparison. As During notes, Dickens' own interest in stage magic was pronounced: part of his amateur theatrical repertoire was a sleight-of-hand performance as "The Unparalleled Necromancer Rhia Rhama Rhoos" (114). "Enchanting," "magic," "necromancy": Dickens' use of the last as a stage moniker suggests that the three are more or less synonymous terms to him.

The spectacle the druids invoked to control superstitious followers was enacted on a much grander scale as well, according to *A Child's History*. Dickens continues, "These Druids built great Temples and altars, open to the sky, fragments of some of which are yet remaining" (132). Fascination with Stonehenge and other ancient sites was common then as today. The Victorians claimed it as "an extraordinary relic of antiquity," the "wonder of the west" (*Parliamentary Gazetteer* 219). Well before carbon dating, magnetometers, and ground-penetrating radar, scholars could only speculate on the who, why, and how of Stonehenge. Some suggested that the Phoenicians were responsible for the site, but as Edgar Allan Poe writes, "general opinion seems to be in favor of a Druidical Temple" (252). Given the little information possessed by the Victorians, many seemed content with wild speculation. Poe's travel essay, for example, dwells rather on the fanciful than anything factual: the well-known legend that giants moved the stones into place. Nor is he alone; other accounts reprinted the assertion that Merlin erected the stones, and publishers were still circulating Daniel

Defoe's *Modern History of the Devil*, which claimed that the transportation of the stones and building of Stonehenge was one of the punishments of Satan (79). Henry Brown's 1823 *An Illustration of Stonehenge and Abury* suggested that the current state of the site was the result of the biblical flood, and that the stones' erection was the work of the antediluvians: "the lives of the [Antediluvians] were, generally speaking, ten times the duration of those of the [Druids]; that they were, in all probability, in consequence, both of greater stature and of greater strength" (21). Dickens, while he steers clear of fantasy, still veers off into sheer speculation:

We know, from examination of the great blocks of which such buildings are made, that they could not have been raised without the aid of some ingenious machines, which are common now, but which the ancient Britons certainly did not use in the making of their own uncomfortable houses. I should not wonder if the Druids [...] knowing more than the rest of the Britons, kept the people out of sight while they made these buildings, and then pretended that they built them by magic. (*Child's History* 132)

The source of the druids' power, their "ingenious machines" that simulate magical means, may also have been suggested by the types of magical entertainment popular at the time of *A Child's History's* composition. During notes that a common type of magician was the "apparatus conjuror," who, for example, might "[display] in his set various automata, never-ending wine bottles, optical illusions, magical tables with magnificent coverings, and elaborate cabinets of concealment" (113). Dickens was familiar with all of these devices, having in 1843 purchased a London magician's stock in order to put on a show for Charley Dickens' birthday, out of which an annual tradition was soon established. Peter Ackroyd reports that "Experts in such matters, on examining all the available evidence, incline to the belief that Dickens was no more than a competent magician, relying upon simple mechanical tricks of illusion" (393). It is perhaps because of what he was able to accomplish with his "ingenious machines" – even as a "no more than competent" magician – that

Dickens was aware of the advantages secret technology gave its possessor. The druids in his depiction are an established technocracy, ruling the Britons by conflating the material and spiritual. This false mysticism, however, says far more about the anxieties of 1850-51 than it does about the druids themselves.

II. The Roman Catholic Church

Dickens' chief source for *A Child's History*, Thomas Keightley's *The History of England* (1841), may have first suggested to him the connection he draws between druids and Catholicism. Keightley writes:

All knowledge was in the hands of the Druids; they were the priests, the philosophers, and the judges of the people; those who refused to submit to their sentence were punished by excommunication, and as the Celtic race has been at all times prone to superstition, this weapon was as powerful in their hands as in those of the Romish clergy of after ages. (2)

Indeed, this idea would have had a particular resonance in 1851 as Roman power seemed a looming threat. As other scholars have noted, Dickens' *Child's History* is shaped by contemporary ideas rather than faithfulness to the past. Oliver Tearle, for example, suggests that the usefulness of the text lies in its ability to "shine considerable light on Dickens: on his political and religious attitudes, his prejudices, and his sympathies." Likewise, Rosemary Jann argues that *A Child's History* "reveals several [...] methods for writing the common man, especially the working man, back into the past" (200). Dickens uses his history writing, not to explain the past, but to make the past explain the present. It is in this vein that Dickens' portrayal of the druids and Catholics may be read:

I am writing a little history of England for my boy, which I will send you when it is printed for him, though your boys are too old to profit by it. It is curious that I have tried to impress upon him (writing, I daresay, at the same moment with you) the exact spirit of your paper, for I don't know

what I should do if he were to get hold of any Conservative or High Church notions; and the best way of guarding against any such horrible result is, I take it, to wring the parrots' necks in his very cradle. (*Letters* 3:482)

Dickens writes this in 1843, his earliest reference to undertaking what became *A Child's History*.³ How much Charley Dickens' High Church notions still weighed on his father's mind over the interval of eight years is impossible to guess; however, the year preceding Dickens' commencement of *A Child's History* marked the high tide of anti-Catholic and anti-High Church sentiment in England.

This contemporary background rather than any historical context shapes Dickens' presentation of Catholicism in *A Child's History*. Its readers would be quick to see their own fears of the so-called Papal Aggression echoed in description after description of power-hungry popes, always plotting some new incursion onto English soil. But as he did ten years prior in *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens is clear to delineate between Catholicism as a faith, practiced by innocent, if deluded, men and women, and the Catholic Church, an entity whose chief aim in Dickens' estimation was enslavement of the masses. In his Preface to *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens writes, "However imperfectly those disturbances [of the Gordon Riots] are set forth in the following pages, they are impartially painted by one who has no sympathy with the Romish Church, though he acknowledges as most men do, some esteemed friends among the followers of its creed" (xxiv). As Robert Butterworth notes, "there is a distinction to be made between Roman Catholicism and people who are Roman Catholics. They are our brothers and sisters, no matter how misguided, from Dickens' perspective, their opinions and practices and no matter how harmful the institution to which they belong" (148). This sense of distinction is carried back into the past as well. Historical Catholics whom Dickens esteems – or at least sympathizes with – are treated with some generosity. Of Joan of Arc, for example:

There is no doubt, now, that Joan believed she saw and heard these things. It is very well known that such delusions are a disease which is not by any means

Jen Cadwallader, "Dickens' 'A Child's History of England'"

uncommon. It is probable enough that there were figures of Saint Michael, and Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret, in the little chapel [...] and that they first gave Joan the idea of those three personages. She had long been a moping, fanciful girl, and, though she was a very good girl, I dare say she was a little vain, and wishful for notoriety. (323)

Dickens' prejudices here seem more related to his estimation of young women than to anti-Catholic sentiment. Indeed, connecting Joan's spiritual experiences to a "not uncommon" disease (probably referring to the well-known case of Christoph Friedrich Nicolai, whose account of supernatural visions was much discussed in early nineteenth-century treatises on auditory and visual hallucinations) shows a good deal of sympathy at such an early period for understanding mental illness. Nor is this the only example of Dickens' generosity in treating the Catholic faithful. In concluding his overview of the Gunpowder Plot, he writes, "the Catholics, in general, who had recoiled with horror from the idea of the infernal contrivance, were unjustly put under more severe laws than before" (444). He also makes a point of exonerating Catholics as the cause of the Great Fire of London, noting, "The Catholics were accused of having wilfully set London in flames. [...] There is no reasonable doubt, however, that the fire was accidental. An inscription on the Monument long attributed it to the Catholics; but it is removed now, and was always a malicious and stupid untruth" (503).

Dickens' willingness to call foul on Protestant prejudice and treat his Catholic fellow countrymen with some objectivity only draws into sharper relief the severity of his stance toward the Roman Church itself. In fact, the contrast mirrors his earlier discussion of the Britons versus the druids who controlled them. Nor is this the only similarity. Dickens' depiction of powerful figures in the Catholic hierarchy aligns them with the druids in a number of ways. In his opening discussion of the priesthood under St. Dunstan, Dickens writes:

For their greater safety in sickness and accident, living alone by themselves in solitary places, it was necessary that they should study the virtues of plants and herbs, and

should know how to dress cuts, burns, scalds, and bruises, and how to set broken limbs. Accordingly they taught themselves, and one another, a great variety of useful arts; and became skillful in agriculture, medicine, surgery, and handicraft. (152)

So far, so good. The account is reminiscent of Callcott's description of the druids' secretive herb lore, but Dickens marks such knowledge as a corollary of surviving in isolation rather than a necessity for maintaining power. Yet his depiction continues: "And when they wanted the aid of any little piece of machinery, which would be simple enough now, but was marvelous then, to impose a trick upon the poor peasants, they knew very well how to make it; and *did* make it many a time and often, I have no doubt" (152, italics original). The train of Dickens' thinking here suggests a particular logic: that a disparity in knowledge between classes (druids and Britons, priests and peasants) creates a gap that those with knowledge will seek to widen. The ruling class reinforces the power they wield through their superior access to and understanding of technology. The fact that Dickens saw both the ancient Britons and early Catholics as credulous victims of religious chicanery perhaps indicates his sense of a continuity – the English have always been superstitious, always ready to be duped by the material masquerading as the spiritual, no matter how far back in English history you reach. Superstition is part of the national character.

That Dickens depicts his fellow countrymen as easy marks in no way excuses the religious authorities taking advantage of them, however. Dickens portrays the priesthood with some levity; for St. Dunstan himself, Dickens is unreservedly vituperative. He variously describes him as "imperious, audacious, ill-conditioned" (153), "sour" (153), a "villain" (153), and "stern and artful" (156). Like the artful druids before him, Dunstan is "an ingenious smith, and worked at a forge in a little cell" (152). And like those false enchanters, Dunstan puts his ingenuity to work in creating spiritual spectacle:

Once [...] when the question was discussed whether priests should have permission to marry [...] as he sat with his

Jen Cadwallader, "Dickens' 'A Child's History of England'"

head hung down, apparently thinking about it, a voice seemed to come out of a crucifix in the room, and warn the meeting to be of his opinion. This was some juggling of Dunstan's, and was probably his own voice disguised. (156)

One of the saint's miracles is here reduced to a parlor trick, a staple of a Punch and Judy show. Even worse, according to Dickens, was Dunstan's engineered disaster at a meeting of the Witenagemot to discuss celibacy in the priesthood. He writes,

another meeting being held on the same subject, and he and his supporters being seated on one side of a great room, and their opponents on the other, he rose and said, 'To Christ himself, as Judge, do I commit this cause!' Immediately on these words being spoken, the floor where the opposite party sat gave way, and some were killed and many wounded. You may be pretty sure that it had been weakened under Dunstan's direction, and that it fell at Dunstan's signal. His part of the floor did not go down. No, no. He was too good a workman for that. (156)

Yes, yes, it did. While Dickens' account agrees with Keightley's, even Keightley includes a footnote allowing for the possibility of the now accepted history of the event: that the entire floor gave way, and that Dunstan saved himself by clinging to a beam.⁴ Dickens, in denying this possibility, emphasizes Dunstan's workmanship – i.e. his ability to use technology as a tool to exploit superstition. Keightley is also, tellingly, more generous in describing Dunstan's supposed temptation by the devil, the episode that inspired the nursery rhyme

St. Dunstan, as the story goes,
Once pull'd the devil by the nose
With red-hot tongs, which made him roar,
That he was heard three miles or more. (Hone 671)

According to Keightley, Dunstan's "intense study" caused "a severe attack of fever," leading to supposition that Dunstan may have suffered "a partial

derangement of intellect, for all through his life he was, according to his own account (and we should not be too forward to accuse him of falsehood,) tormented by visions of evil spirits” (31). Dickens has no trouble being too forward, disagreeing with his source in order to assert that “[Dunstan] used to tell the most extraordinary lies about demons and spirits, who, he said, came there to persecute him. [...] Some people are inclined to think this nonsense a part of Dunstan’s madness (for his head never quite recovered the fever), but I think not. I observe that it induced ignorant people to consider him a holy man, and that it made him very powerful. Which was exactly what he always wanted” (152). This reading of Dunstan’s visions is in keeping with the general tenor of Dickens’ depictions of both druids and the Catholic Church, but it is particularly striking when juxtaposed with the sympathetic tone Dickens later adopts in relation to Joan of Arc. Both are saints of the Catholic Church, both subject to supernatural visions, yet while Joan is a slightly vain but mostly mentally ill young woman, Dunstan is a power-hungry charlatan. There is undoubtedly a gender dynamic to Dickens’ assessment, but the status dynamic seems equally important to him. Joan is a peasant, Dunstan a wealthy member of the aristocracy; Joan is never a part of the Catholic hierarchy, while Dunstan rose to become Archbishop of Canterbury, “for his greater glory” (153). Given his correlation throughout *A Child’s History* of secret technological knowledge with spiritual deceptions, it is no wonder that Dunstan ranks perhaps alongside “Bloody” Queen Mary as the history’s chief Catholic villain.

III. Conclusion

The technocratic element of both druidical and Catholic power in *A Child’s History* reflects the growing awareness of living with and being reliant on technology at midcentury. In the same letter where Dickens exults over drowning Henry I’s son in *A Child’s History*, he writes:

I have always had an instinctive feeling against the Exhibition, of a faint inexplicable sort. I have a great confidence in its being a correct one somehow or other – perhaps it was a foreshadowing of its bewilderment of the

Jen Cadwallader, "Dickens' *A Child's History of England*"

public. My apprehension – and prediction – is, that they will come out of it at last, with that feeling of boredom and lassitude (to say nothing of having spent their money) that the reaction will not be as wholesome and vigorous and quick, as folks expect. (448)

Dickens' concern for whether or not the Great Exhibition's guests will get their money's worth, or be, effectively, duped by the lure of the wonders of technology, is a secular version of his religious criticisms in *A Child's History*. Indeed, as Ackroyd suggests, Dickens' work on the Central Committee of the Working Classes for the Great Exhibition denotes that he "was seen as a possible representative, or guardian, of the less affluent members of the community" (588). In some senses, like the Britons and early Catholics, Dickens' contemporaries did need guarding against the spectacle of technology. The Great Exhibition serves only as a larger symbol for the smaller ways technology was "bewildering" the Victorians – it was the Stonehenge of the age.

Dickens traces technological and spiritual confluences in myriad places in the Victorians' day-to-day lives. As Trey Philpotts notes, "His imaginative engagements with the technological world [...] reflect the same ambivalences and contradictions that mark the rest of his fiction" (214). Thus the railway, for example, was "rapidly increasing the commerce, comforts, intercourse, affluence, and happiness of the whole community" – the surest sign of the progress of the age (Dickens, "William Wordsworth" 213). But as a spectacle, railway travel could easily become mystical to the Victorians. In *Mugby Junction* (1866), Dickens' protagonist Barbox Brothers uses the branch lines intersecting at a railway junction as the basis for a spiritual journey, allowing himself to be completely guided by technology.⁵ And as Dickens himself was to learn all too well when he was involved in the 1865 Staplehurst Disaster, faith in technology was faith in a false god. After all, rail travellers were not in the hands of the all-powerful steam engines, they were in the hands of the railway companies' directors, who, without clear government oversight, squeezed as much profit out of the public's railway mania as they could, often at the expense of the public's

railway safety. The sheer number of rail-related fatalities between 1830-1870, Michael Freeman notes, suggests that this period “[was] indeed a black era for accidents” (85).

Ten years after Dickens completed *A Child's History*, his fears about the power of a technocracy over the masses were still absorbing him as he equated the “terrible slaughtering of passengers” with the lack of “a proper caution in the management” of the railways (“Rather Interested” 17). Dickens’ treatment of spiritual matters reflects the religious turmoil particular to the mid-Victorian period. More than this, 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.

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Notes

¹ Dickens writes of being amused by a “psycho-grapher, which writes at the dictation of spirits. It delivered itself [...] of this extraordinarily lucid message: x. y. z! upon which it was gravely explained by the true believers that ‘the spirits were out of temper about something’” (*Letters* 7: 289).

² See Volume III, pps. 107-13, of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* for street conjurors’ accounts of their work. Those he interviewed suggest that conjurors profited more from explaining how their tricks were done (often selling explanatory pamphlets) than through the performances themselves.

³ As he reported in a letter to W.H. Wills, Dickens began writing actual copy for *A Child's History of England* in July of 1851 (*Letters* 6:474).

⁴ Keightley writes that “the floor gave way under the opposite party, and they were killed or maimed by the falling timbers; while the part where Dunstan and his friends were sitting remained firm and unmoved. This may doubtless have been accidental, but one may without breach of charity suspect, as Fuller says, ‘that Dunstan, who had so much of a smith, had here something of a carpenter in him, and some device used by him about pinning

and propping up the room.' Unfortunately the character neither of Dunstan nor of his church offers any security that such an atrocious measure would not be resorted to in support of the cause" (36-37).

⁵ And worth noting, it is in Mugby Junction that Dickens' famous ghost story "The Signalman" appears, a story in which a railway employee is haunted by a figure on the train tracks who turns out to be himself in the future, warning him of his death by train – a telling metaphor for Dickens' own concerns for the Victorians' future with technology. For a fuller discussion of technology and the supernatural in Mugby Junction, see Cadwallader, "Death by Train."

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