

T. W. Hill and 'Tom King and the Frenchman' *

TAKAO SAJO

'SEVEN DIALS' in *Sketches by Boz* begins with a rather puzzling statement: 'if Tom King and the Frenchman had not immortalized Seven Dials, Seven Dials would have immortalized itself.'¹ Indeed, the precinct was famous for ballads and songs published by Catnach and Pitts, and without 'Tom King and the Frenchman', its fame as a centre of penny publications would have long been remembered.

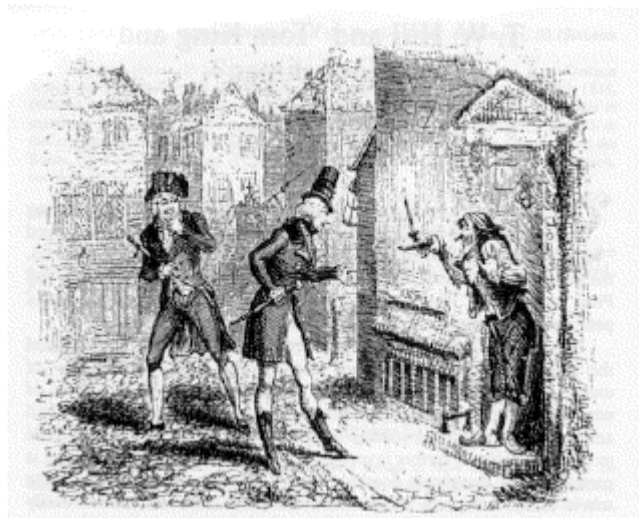
But today's reader will be perplexed by the phrase, 'Tom King and the Frenchman', which cannot convey the same immediacy of understanding as it might have done to Victorian readers. There are of course annotations on the phrase, by A. L. Hayward and T. W. Hill among others, and many readers of Dickens are quite content with these annotations without further investigating whether they are correct. This is partly because the phrase does not much affect our understanding of the whole essay, and partly because the first-hand materials are not easily available.

My copy of *The Humourist's Miscellany* (1804) has an anonymous piece in it entitled 'Monsieur Tonson'. This is a very amusing verse tale in which Tom King, lover of 'a frolic' and 'a pleasant mischief', night after night knocks on the door of a Frenchman and asks if a Mr Thompson lodges there. Reading this humorous piece gives me an idea that Tom King must be some one other than the one who keeps a coffee shop at Covent Garden, as annotated by Hill, because Tom King's coffee shop, often called King's tavern, was 'one of the notorious and infamous places', and 'after his death, the house was retained by his notorious widow, who was constantly before the King's Bench for keeping a disorderly house'.² This somewhat indecent owner does not seem to fit in with the jovial yet mischievous character of the tale.

The question of anonymity of the tale, together with the dubious identity of Tom King, was resolved when I came across an 1830 version of the tale in the Stanford University Library, written by John Taylor and illustrated by Robert Cruikshank.³ In that little booklet the verse tale was prefaced by a 'Life of Tom King', according to which Tom King was Thomas King (1730-1805), an actor and dramatist, and the author's friend. He was introduced as 'Thomas King, commonly called "Tom King", the "merry wag" whose love of fun suggested and executed the prank which is recorded in the following well-known stanzas'.

This popular tale was dramatized by William Moncrieff and was put on the London stage on 20 September 1821.⁴ The dramatized version is more specific than

the original tale in that it gives the Frenchman a name and profession, while in the other he is mentioned simply as 'the Frenchman' without a hint of how he earns his living. With various theatrical additions to the original, the tale has spread through various social layers, and has immortalized Seven Dials, where its main action takes place. Charles Mathews played *Tonson* in New York in 1822 and 1823, and was enthusiastically received.



“Then, with unalter’d courtesy, he spake –
“No, Sare, no Monsieur TONSON lodges here.”

Robert Cruickshank: illustration to John Taylor, *Monsieur Tonson* (2nd ed., 1830).
Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury.

‘Tom King and the Frenchman’ was annotated first by A. L. Hayward in 1924, who writes:

Tom King was a character in W. T. Moncrieff’s farce, *Monsieur Tonson*. He described himself as ‘a jolly dog’ who worried to distraction M. Morbleu, a French barber of Seven Dials, by repeated enquiries for a Mr. Thompson.⁵

We recognize at first glance that this was based on the dramatized version of 'Monsieur Tonson'. Tom King describes himself in Moncrieff's *Monsieur Tonson*: '... for a quiz, a hoax, a joke, a jest, a song, a dance, a catch, a tale, a race, or a row, Tom King would not turn his back on any man in England. A'n't I the choice spirit of the day, the jolly dog, the roaring boy, . . .?' Although Hayward does not specifically refer to 'Tom King and the Frenchman', he gives us a general idea of it, through a dramatized version of 'Monsieur Tonson'.

A quarter of a century later T. W. Hill supplemented Hayward by mentioning the original poem and identifying 'Tom King' and 'the Frenchman'.

Tom King kept a coffee-shed under the portico of St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden: Hogarth pictured it in his 'Morning'. The Frenchman was Monsieur Tonson in a humorous poem of that title by John Taylor (1757-1832), and W. T. Moncrieff based a farce upon it (1821).⁶

Hill is wrong with his remark on the person of Tom King, and 'the Frenchman' is Monsieur Morbleu, not Monsieur Tonson: 'Monsieur Tonson' is a Frenchman's way of pronouncing 'Mr. Thompson'. But this seems to have been the final version of the annotation of the phrase, and most readers of Dickens have accepted it as correct. Deborah A. Thomas, in her *Charles Dickens: Selected Short Fiction* nearly copies Hill's without critical examination:

Figures in *Monsieur Tonson* (1821), a farce by 'William Thomas Moncrieff' (William Thomas Thomas) based on a poem of the same title by John Taylor (1757-1832). Tom King's coffee house in Covent Garden is depicted in Hogarth's 'Morning' (1738)⁷

It seems that Hill's authority stands so eminently high that no one dares to doubt his authenticity. Even *The Dickens Index* (Oxford, 1988) gives a similar entry, if slightly more detailed:

Tom King kept a coffee-shed under the portico of St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, and figures in *Monsieur Tonson*, a farce by W. T. Moncrieff produced in 1821, based on a comic poem by John Taylor (1757-1832). Tonson is a barber in Seven Dials, and is infuriated by King's repeated enquiries about a 'Mr. Thompson'.⁸

So far as I know, the only person that correctly writes of Tom King is Gillian Avery: ‘. . . *Monsieur Tonson* . . . records the exploits of Tom King, an actor and notorious prankster, who solemnly presents himself each night at the house of an inoffensive French couple in Soho, asking for a mythical Mr. Thompson’.⁹

Reading ‘*Monsieur Tonson*’ in the original verse tale, we find that there were in Seven Dials ‘the num’rous clans/Of honest, plodding, foreign artisans,/Known at that time by th’ name of Refugees’. Many Huguenots came to St. Giles after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). But Dickens the journalist affirms that he doubts the veracity of the legend. He points out:

We can suppose a man rash enough to inquire at random—at a house with lodgers too—for a Mr. Thompson, with all but the certainty before his eyes of finding at least two or three Thompsons in any house of moderate dimensions; but a Frenchman—a Frenchman in Seven Dials! Pooh! he was an Irishman. Tom King’s education had been neglected in his infancy and as he couldn’t understand half the man said, he took it for granted he was talking French.¹⁰

If Huguenots came here, the Irish had settled here from Elizabethan times. And by the beginning of the nineteenth century, St. Giles became the dirtiest slum of London with a lot of the Irish living in filth and poverty, and it was often called ‘little Dublin’. By the time Dickens wrote *Sketches by Boz*, Seven Dials was no longer a place for pardonable merry-making of old England, but a noisy, riotous place where the Irish either idled about the gin-shops, or scolded, drank, squabbled, fought and swore on the street.

Dickens’s frequent references to contemporary theatre and minor writings are toilsome to track down, but it turns out very rewarding when the teeming world of Dickens becomes discernible through it. ‘Tom King and the Frenchman’ is certainly one of those cases, and we can fully recapture the image of Seven Dials which Dickens had in mind when he wrote this little essay.

1 Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 69.

2 Ben Weinreb & Christopher Hibbert eds., *The London Encyclopaedia* (Macmillan, 1983).

3 *Monsieur Tonson* (London: Marsh & Miller, 1830).

4 William Moncrieff, *Monsieur Tonson*, in *British Drama Illustrated*, 8 (London: John

Dicks, 1864-1872), pp. 20-32.

5 Arthur L. Hayward, *The Dickens Encyclopaedia* (1924: rpt. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 92.

6 T.W. Hill, 'Notes on *Sketches by Boz*' *Dickensian*, 46 (1942), p. 41.

7 Deborah A. Thomas ed., *Charles Dickens: Selected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

8 N.Bentley, M. Slater & N. Burgis eds., *The Dickens Index* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

9 Gillian Avery, *Childhood's Pattern* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), pp. 19-20.

10 *Sketches by Boz*, p. 69.

11 Leslie Shepard, *John Pitts: Ballad Printer of Seven Dials, London, 1768-1844* (London: Private Libraries Association, 1969), p. 39. Charles Knight ed. *London III* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1843), pp.265-6.

* *The Dickensian* Vol.90 Part 2 (The Dickens Fellowship, 1994) 113-16.