

Extracts from

"The Dickens World"

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1. ... I am very far, however, from wishing to return to the old system; but I think that the Poor Law should be accompanied by an organized system of Church charity, and also by some acts designed in title, as well as in substance, for the relief of the poor, and that by other means than driving them into economy by terror. (Letter of Dr. Arnold, on January 20, 1839).

2. Dickens's 'three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays' was, of course, an exaggeration. But the No.1. Dietary approved and published by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1836 included 1 1/2 pints of gruel for every one of the seven days, and the total food for able bodied men in the week was as follows:

On three days: 12 ozs, bread; 1 1/2 pints gruel; 5 ozs. cooked meat; 1/2 lb. potatoes; 1 1/2 pints broth.

On three other days: 12 ozs. bread; 1 1/2 pints gruel; 1 1/2 pints soup; 2 ozs. cheese.

On Friday: 12 ozs. bread; 1 1/2 pints gruel; 14 ozs. suet or rice pudding; 2 ozs. cheese.

(Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners (1836))

3. Leaving aside the doctrinaire of Malthusianism by which many of its promoters were influenced, the main practical aims of the new Poor Law were to reduce the cost of relief by joining parishes in unions and applying a uniform standard throughout the country.... With these aims no unprejudiced person who knew the facts could possibly quarrel. Dickens never mentions them, nor does he discuss the wisdom of the general policy of restricting, as far as possible, outdoor relief for the able-bodied: he concentrates mainly on the bad workhouse feeding, the absurdity of such officers as Bumble and the utter failure to make any proper provision for the pauper children. With these points in mind we can look at Harriet Martineau's criticism of him.

4. It is, of course, from Pickwick, and most of all from the coaching parts of it, that the popular idea of the Dickens 'period' is mainly derived; but the time-strands in the book are so various that the

period they suggest is an imaginary one: retrospection and ante-dating combine to produce an amalgamation for which the supposed date is little more than a convenient label.

5. He was often even rather behind his times. His popularity as a moralist was thus enhanced by his habitual retrospection: his ante-dated plots took some of the sting out of his satire for those who merely wanted entertainment, and encouraged the mild exercise of historical comparison for those who cared for profit and instruction.

6. Money is the instrument by which the villain thwarts the hero; and the two are chiefly distinguished by their attitudes towards it; their attitudes to women are secondary.

7. ... he did not create misers of the sterile and passive kind, who love money merely for its own sake, and hoard their useless coin in chimneys and teapots. ...

8. This obsession with money's power goes to explain Dickens's lasting interest in Debtors' Prisons.... It is certainly true that most of the experience, visual and emotional, on which Dickens's descriptions of debtors' prisons were based came directly from the time when his father was in the Marshalsea; it is true also that imprisonment for debt was an obvious target for destructive Benthamism; but still the pity for debtors is only the extreme instance, backed by the most authentic experience, of an attitude to money which is apparent in all his treatment of it. For money is an instrument of cruelty, and imprisonment is the most spectacular form of suffering it can inflict.

9. It is dangerous to be exact, but it is clear that in the 'forties a different type of person comes on the Dickens scene, and that the scene itself changes. There is a difference of atmosphere between *A Christmas Carol* (1843), which is a story of vague undated benevolence, and *The Chimes* (1844), which is a topical satire. Martin Chuzzlewit is uncertain ground; but it is safe to say that in *Dombey and Son* the new style is so far developed as to be unmistakable. The people, places, and things become 'modern'.

10. These changes are clearly reflected in Dickens's work. With *Dombey and Son* the perpetual interest in money enters on a new phase....

11. In the earlier novels finance is very individualistic; from *Dombey* onwards, though the interest in money's personal power still continues, and is indeed a main theme of *Great Expectations*, money as a system is even more important.

12. A great deal has been written and said about Dickens as a writer for 'the people'. Yet his chief public was among the middle and lower-middle classes, rather than among the proletarian mass. His mood and idiom were those of the class from which he came, and his morality throve upon class distinctions even when it claimed to supersede them.... It should hardly be necessary to stress the substantial truth of this judgement; but Dickens has so often been claimed as popular in other senses -- by Chesterton as if he were the leader of a kind of peasants' revolt in Bloomsbury; by Mr. Jackson as if his heart were really devoted to the uniting of the workers of the world -- that some insistence on it here, in addition to what has already been implied in other chapters, must be forgiven.

13. Dickens...was an exceedingly practical person, who thought in terms of money and getting things done: in other words, he was more concerned with administration than with politics proper.

14. ... show well enough his inquisitively morbid interest in all forms of crime and death; but they show too a kind of clerical satisfaction in the functioning of a well-run organization.

15. It is only in the 'fifties that Dickens begins to make general attacks on the central administrative departments of Government; and in this, as in other things, he was following rather than leading public opinion.

16. The paragraph is extremely important and interesting, because in it Dickens accepts the fundamental ethical and political proposition of the political economy he generally so much deplors. The interests of employers and employed must be assumed to be identical or must be destroyed. The doctrine of the identity of interests was common to the utilitarians and the economists: on the question of theory there is no real difference between Dickens and W. R. Greg: he is not in the least a Socialist.

17. But when he uses Christian imagery in describing things about which he did feel deeply it is difficult not to feel that it is a mask to conceal some inability to control or express his emotion. There was no question of deliberate hypocrisy; he accepted certain religious opinions,

and thought that they were the proper adjuncts of any emotional crisis; but the emotions were more powerful than the beliefs, and the two could never coalesce.