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# Colby Library Quarterly

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No. 4

## CHARLES DICKENS IN MAINE

By PHILO CALHOUN

IF, in this year marking the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his birth, there must be a paper on the approximately seventy-hour sojourn of Charles Dickens in the Pine Tree State, two things should be clear from the start: (1) Dickens did not enjoy Maine; (2) Maine treated him courteously (by leaving him alone), and paid him fairly well, but indicated little more than modified rapture for the Gad's Hill Gasper. In a word, he came, he was seen (and heard), and he made no important conquests.

It is at least arguable that not enjoying Maine, even at the end of March, betrays some deep-seated defect of character — rather like not enjoying sleep on a rainy Sunday morning. Whatever the reason, the mood of this occasion was regrettably and almost uniquely at variance with the pattern throughout the nearly five months of the author's second visit to America. But there were reasons, as we shall see.

It will be recalled that Dickens' first trip to the United States in 1842 had an unhappy aftermath in the storm of indignation which greeted his *American Notes*, published only four months after his return to England. This was heightened as successive monthly parts of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, commencing the following January, developed a dismal picture of America and Americans. At that time the author had no intention of ever revisiting the States, and in line with a familiar psychology in such matters, an intemperate American press produced its own balm by way of large sales of both books.

Rarely has so much happened to a man or to a country as to Charles Dickens and to the United States within the twenty-five years following 1842. The handsome young man who had made all England laugh with *Pickwick Papers*, squirm with

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*Oliver Twist* and *Nickleby*, and weep with *The Old Curiosity Shop* had now, as creator of the far more important *Dombey*, *Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* — to say nothing of the five Christmas Books — become by general acclaim the greatest master of fiction in the English-speaking world, and one of the outstanding sociologists of his day. And as if this were not enough, his natural aptitude for acting, directed to his own literary products in a series of readings, had added substantially to his reputation.

In the interim America had gone through the somber tragedy of a civil war which changed and matured its values. Its cities, particularly in the North, had mushroomed into wealth, dignity, assurance and often beauty. Manners were improved, and culture and education had flowered in a climate of growing respect and humility. Young Dickens' reaction to matters like slavery and prison conditions — even to literary piracies and the prevalence of spittoons — which had fired the adolescent forties into patriotic furor, excited no comparable animus in the American gentleman of the late sixties. One journal, on getting news of Dickens' contemplated second visit in 1867, demanded an apology for *American Notes* and *Chuzzlewit* as a condition precedent for readings here, but no one appears to have paid much attention to the suggestion.

Since 1853 the author had on occasion been persuaded to read from his books for the benefit of a charitable cause or institution, but not until 1858 did he embark on a career as a public reader. From then on, creative writing came to a stumbling halt. Only two important books, one of them unfinished, were produced during the last nine years of his life. The magazine publishing business was increasingly shifted to the shoulders of others. Not only were the readings enormously profitable but they also gave scope to an histrionic talent which had frequently charmed friends and small audiences. Dickens would far rather act than write — one had almost said, *than eat* — and his natural flair for it was undeniable. Also he loved to see human reactions to the people of his own creation, given new life by his own dramatic interpretation. Such reactions, and his visible happiness in them, were almost uninterrupted until his last reading on March 15, 1870, less than three months before his death.

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The enterprising James T. Fields of Ticknor & Fields, Boston publishers, had been trying for years to interest Dickens in a series of readings in America. But not until 1867, after an exploratory trip by the author's agent, George Dolby, had inspired a glowing report, was the tour finally arranged. The "Chief" arrived on November 19, 1867, at the Parker House in Boston amid tremendous fanfare.

Dolby's most optimistic prediction of net profit for the tour had been £15,500, which was an underestimate by £3500. The actual gross came to 228,000 American dollars. As I have said elsewhere, it is hard to visualize in these days the sort of popularity which brought thousands of people, night after night, in one of the stormiest winters on record, on foot, in horse-drawn vehicles, even in small boats, to drafty, ill-heated halls, just to listen to a story; harder yet to analyze an enthusiasm which produced double queues of ticket seekers, often half a mile long; hardest of all to credit the cheering, the laughter, the unshamed tears which one aging gentleman with no properties except a screen, a reading desk and a gas lamp, was able to evoke at these affairs, night after memorable night.

The plan was for eighty readings which included New England bookings (outside of Boston) in Providence, Worcester, New Haven and Springfield. After the abandonment of the schedule west of Buffalo, due to the heavy snows and Dickens' failing health, four smaller New England cities were added, including Portland. The total number of readings eventually given was seventy-six.

Dolby's originally projected area was negatively stated: not north of Portland or south of Washington or west of Chicago. Just when Portland became a firm commitment and why, one can only guess. A town of sizable population (30,000) in a hitherto untouched State; a reasonably brief rail trip from the Boston headquarters; Osgood's familiarity with the country (Osgood was one of Fields' partners); a nostalgic hope expressed by that well-known Portland native and the Reader's good friend, Henry W. Longfellow — any or all of these are good guesses as occur to me. At any rate, arrangements were made for a reading at the City Hall in Portland on Monday, March 30, 1868.

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On March 19th Dickens left Rochester on his way east, after a reading at Buffalo and a holiday interval of three days at Niagara Falls. Buffalo snows had caused a return of his foot troubles, to say nothing of the "true American," his name for the catarrh which had recurred with distressing frequency throughout the trying winter.

The journey to Albany, his next appointment, was a nightmare. A sudden thaw flooded the line, resulting in an unpleasant overnight stay at Utica, a start at six in the morning and a close call for the Albany reading. Then a three-day respite at Springfield, followed by New Haven and New Bedford.

A heavy snowstorm with high cold winds on March 20th and 21st added nothing to the comfort of these comparatively unprofitable "fillers" in small, widely separated cities. On the 27th he had read at New Bedford, and next day, Saturday, rose at seven to get back to Boston to prepare for the Portland journey. There would have been no need to start two days in advance, except for the fact that no trains went in or out of Portland on Sunday. A Monday trip was out of the question. So his party dined in Boston at three, and at five his train left the old North Station for the 130-mile trip north. Late March is brisk on the North Shore, but Friday's sunshine carried more than a hint of Spring and the heavy snows of the previous week were dwindling. However, March twilights are fast, and the low, white countryside faded into darkness even before Newburyport.

And meantime, what was Portland doing? Was the Governor meeting the party? Or the Mayor? Was there a special escort of police to protect the celebrated visitor from the curious? What were the headlines?

The plain facts are that there wasn't anything at all. If anyone even a stranger, stayed awake to greet Genius, there is no record of it. I can find no advance notice of the arrival in any available Portland newspaper. After the caption "Dickens' Readings," the *Argus* of March 28th says only: "The great novelist of the day gives his first reading in Portland on Monday evening next. A few more desirable seats remain unsold." Nothing about any plans for his reception, entertainment, or interim arrangements. On that day it was said that the number of tickets already sold was about 1300.

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News item in the Portland *Press* of March 30th: "Mr. Dickens arrived in town Saturday night." In the same paper, under "Hotel Arrivals," subheading "Preble House," twelfth on the list is:

Mr. Dickens	England
G. Allison	do.
H. Scott	do.

and well on down the list:

Mr. Osgood	Boston
Y. [sic] T. Beers	do.

The *Press* also carried this paid advertisement:

Mr. Charles Dickens  
will read at  
City Hall  
on Monday evening, March 30, 1868  
His Christmas Carol  
— and —  
The Trial from Pickwick

The Reading will begin at *Eight o'clock precisely* and will be comprised within two hours.

The audience is earnestly requested to be seated *ten minutes before* the commencement of the Reading.

Tickets with reserved seats, Two Dollars.

May be had at Bailey & Noyes Bookstore, Exchange Street.  
Tickets also for sale at the Hall.

The "G. Allison" of the hotel register is "George, the gasman, steadiest and most reliable man I ever employed." George not only manipulated the special gas lamp which Dickens used for every reading, he was also apparently in charge of all "props" and luggage, with the responsibility of having everything on hand and ready when needed. H. Scott was Boz's long-time valet and personal servant. J. T. Beers was probably an agent of Dolby's, helping Osgood with tickets, arrangements at the hall, and financial details. Osgood, of course, was James Ripley Osgood, young (32) partner in the Ticknor & Fields firm, to whom Dolby, perforce in New York to arrange the "farewells" there, had entrusted the Chief for his last two readings before the Boston finale.

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The Portland *Argus* of March 30th has the following under "Local Intelligence": "*Arrival of Mr. Dickens.* — Charles Dickens, Esq., and his suite, . . . arrived in town Saturday evening by the late train, and took rooms at the Preble House. Mr. Dickens . . . walked from the station to the hotel, while his party mostly rode. Mr. Dickens kept his room closely yesterday, receiving his meals in his apartments. At noon he took a walk a short distance, and if the meeting goers had only known who that kindly-featured and somewhat portly gentleman was whom they passed they would have scanned his countenance more closely than they did."

The Portland *Advertiser* of March 29th (Sunday) had only this, under "Local Notices": "Dickens' [*sic*] gives his first reading in Portland Donday [*sic*] evening."

It is surprising that, considering his bad foot, the old gentleman felt like walking the mile and a quarter, mostly uphill, from the station of the Portland, Saco & Portsmouth Railroad at the foot of State Street to the Preble House, on the corner of Congress and Preble streets. But it is quite in character. Ten to fifteen miles would be more like his usual stint when he was in any sort of condition.

It may be fairly assumed that the Preble was the best of its day in Portland — the Chief's personal comfort was top priority on Dolby's expense account. At any rate it was certainly the most interesting. Originally the home of Commodore Preble, the luxurious and dignified three-story brick mansion, with grounds extending north to Cumberland Avenue, had been one of the show places of Portland. The Commodore died in 1806, but his widow continued to live there until her death in 1851. Their only son, Edward Deering, college friend of Longfellow, lived with his mother until he died, a victim of consumption, in 1846. It was by Mrs. Preble's wishes that the old place was converted and enlarged into a hotel, which first opened in 1860. Nothing is left of it today; a modern bank building occupies the site. In 1868 the proprietor was one Samuel B. Krogman, a wretched host, from Dickens' account.

The hotel was "particularly bad," he told Mrs. Fields. The food he described as "bad and disgusting," and he seemed to take special offense at it being served in small individual dishes — "as if Osgood and I should quarrel over it." It is conceiv-

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able also that the Maine prohibition law made no contribution to the hilarity of the weekend. Here, in his own words, was Dickens' diet at the time: "At 7 in the morning, in bed, a tumbler of new cream and two tablespoonsful of rum. At 12, a sherry cobbler and a biscuit. At 3 (dinner time) a pint of champagne. At five minutes to 8, an egg beaten up with a glass of sherry. Between the parts, the strongest beef tea that can be made, drunk hot. At a quarter past 10, soup, and any little thing to drink that I can fancy." Possibly a thoughtful and forewarned valet had anticipated a scarcity of some of the essential ingredients here, but one wonders whether the Preble House would be quite up to the niceties of proper icing and suitable containers.

Whether it was the walk from the station, or the aridity of the reception, or just a hard cold plus an overwhelming weariness, "Mr. Dickens of England" had a miserable night. He writes Mamie (Mary Agnes Dickens) the next day: "I have coughed from two or three in the morning until five or six, and have been absolutely sleepless. I have had no appetite besides, and no taste. Last night here I took some laudanum, and it is the only thing that has done me good. But the life in this climate is so very hard." He speaks of "the consciousness of great depression and fatigue." And the next day to Forster: "I am nearly used up. Climate, distance, catarrh, travelling and hard work have begun (I may say so now they are nearly over) to tell heavily upon me."

Sunday was a quiet day — letters and a short walk at noon are the only recorded activities. "Mr. Dickens," commented the *Argus*, "remains very quiet in his rooms and receives no visitors, as he is wearied with his continued exertions and is somewhat unwell by reason of a cold."

He describes the walk as a fine one "by the sea." One may conjecture a route north on Fore Street (formerly Front Street) toward the Eastern Promenade, or possibly along Commercial Street toward the residential section on Bramhall Hill.

Sunday, "without any artificial aid," our traveler got a splendid night's rest, and was much refreshed on Monday, the day of the Reading. That morning he had another good walk, this time almost certainly on the Eastern Promenade, "the heights overlooking [the sea]," which commands a magnificent view of

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Casco Bay to the north, and to the west a vista almost equally fine, which on a clear day extends to the blue outlines of the New Hampshire mountains. The total distance from the hotel and back may have been three miles.

It is a commonplace that apparently remote oddments can and do have influence in shaping wholly unrelated plans and events. On July 4, 1866, a careless boy throws a lighted firecracker into a heap of shavings on Commercial Street, Portland. On February 24, 1868, the House of Representatives votes the impeachment of the President of the United States. The firecracker determined the place of Dickens' reading; the impeachment kept the audience under par.

The squib started the Great Fire of Portland which destroyed much of the town's business section, laying waste about two hundred acres. Of this Dickens writes to Forster on March 30th: "I write in a town three parts of which [actually it was about one-seventh, in acreage] were burnt down in a tremendous fire three years ago. The people lived in tents while their city was rebuilding. The charred trunks of the trees with which the streets of the old city were planted, yet stand here and there in the new thoroughfares like black spectres. The rebuilding is still in progress everywhere. Yet such is the astonishing energy of the people that the large hall in which I am to read tonight (its predecessor was burnt) would compare very favorably with the Free Trade Hall at Manchester!" It was the City Hall, located on what is now Monument Square. As a matter of fact, it antedated and survived the fire.

As for Johnson's impeachment, Dickens was fearful that the political crisis would damage his farewells by about one-half. "Everything," he wrote, "is becoming absorbed in the Presidential impeachment, helped by the next Presidential election." Despite political meetings everywhere, hotels full of speakers, and the press completely preoccupied, it didn't turn out as badly as Dickens expected. There is no doubt, however, that the effect of such nationwide furor was to divert attention and interest from the last fortnight of a five-months reading tour. March 30, the day of the Reading, was the first day of the impeachment trial. And yet, as nearly as I can analyze it from the receipts, the Portland audience was about 1250, in a hall which might have seated 1500. "We took last night at Portland,

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£360 English; where a costly Italian troupe, using the same hall tonight, had not booked £14!" The *Press* (March 31) says: "The audience . . . was just large enough to enable all to be comfortably seated," which I take to mean that no one was behind posts or in the back rows or draughty corners. It adds up to about my estimate.

The stage setting of these readings has been too often described to need more than a brief reminder here. There was the dark red screen behind the reader; in front of him the tall desk (Dickens' own design) draped with fringed red velvet. On one side was a small shelf bearing a water pitcher and glass. The lighting was from shaded gas lamps, fed by an elaborate contraption of pipes in charge of the indispensable George, and less fallible than modern electricity. But one wonders why anyone bothered. The reader was not dependent on lamps, any more than he was on the well-worn, elaborately annotated reading copy which he held in his hand. He rarely referred to it. The pages were turned automatically, but the actor needed no prompting, from the moment when, "at eight o'clock precisely," without introduction, the speaker began: "Ladies and gentlemen. I have the honor to read to you 'A Christmas Carol' in five staves. 'Stave One. Marley's Ghost. Marley was dead: to begin with . . .'" And soon his creative genius was in full charge, making each character come alive with his own vitality and unique dramatic awareness.

And how did all this go over in the State of Maine in 1868? On most topics the press of the day boiled between dithyramb and diatribe. If it took a middle ground it was usually from lack of interest. But it is understandable that a Maine newspaper would be more than usually objective on so non-controversial a subject as an English author's reading. I think we may take the single brief press report I have been able to find as symptomatic of audience reaction. Says the *Portland Press* of March 31st: "The applause was frequent and hearty, — the more frequent and the more hearty, we have no doubt, from the fact that an expression of approval was instantly reflected in Mr. Dickens' face as in a mirror." The review goes on to comment on "the talk which has been made about the paraphernalia which Mr. Dickens carries with him, the gas-burners, table, screen, etc. . . . his diamonds, the parting of his hair on

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the back of his head, his little breast-knot of rare flowers, and the general nicety of his appearance." "If," the commentator continues, "this band-box 'make-up' is a little unpleasant at first to our democratic simplicity, as far as we are able to judge, it finally amuses and pleases." The writer found "the upward inflection of voice which he constantly uses — at first decidedly disagreeable," but suggests that it became less so as the audience got used to it. All in the best of humor and with courteous restraint but not, on the whole, descriptive of what we moderns would call a "smash hit." Dickens called it "triumphant," an adjective which may have been directed to the gate receipts — more than adequate, all things considered.

Afterwards, another wretched night, little sleep, and up at six to catch an 8:40 train for Boston. Again he walked from the hotel down State Street to the old station, carrying his own valise. It was a chilly morning, and his heavy shawl of gray and black mixture was folded lengthwise around his shoulders, and held by large pins. A group of girls en route to the Portland High School recognized him in passing, and one of them snipped off a piece of the fringe of his shawl as a memento — a souvenir hunter as incorrigible as the coachman who pulled hair from his fur coat in 1842.

The train stopped for a few minutes at North Berwick, and Osgood persuaded Dickens to stretch his legs while he, Osgood, bought some of the Berwick sponge cake for which the little town was famous. Meantime the well-known red carnation, heavy watch-chain and oddly-brushed hair had started the passengers buzzing, so that the train was just under way when the first of a succession of those who wished to shake his hand put in an appearance. Osgood stood it for a while, and then, with a mumbled excuse, retired to the smoking car. Some time later, when he came back, his seat was taken by an undersized twelve-year old girl, in a gray velvet hat and squirrel muff, who was deep in conversation with his charge. Dickens smilingly waved him away, and went on talking with his small seat-mate until the end of the journey.

She had been watching her chance since the train had left North Berwick, and no sooner had the last of the handshakers subsided, than she sped up the aisle and breathlessly planted herself in Osgood's seat.

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"God bless my soul!" Dickens said. "Where did you come from?"

"I come from Hollis, Maine," stammered the young lady, and went on to recount how her mother and cousin had gone to the reading the night before, but that she and her small sister had stayed at home, although "we wanted to go to your Reading dreadfully." She scornfully reported that there was a lady there who had never even heard of Betsey Trotwood. In fact she "had read only two of your books!"

"Well, upon my word!" exclaimed the author. "You don't mean to say that you have read them?"

"Of course I have," replied the little girl, "every one of them, except the two we are going to buy in Boston. And I've read some of them six times."

"Bless my soul!" said Dickens again.

"Of course," the young lady explained with a burst of candor, "I do skip some of the dull parts once in a while, not the short dull parts, but the long ones."

"Now that," Dickens laughed, "is something I hear very little about. I distinctly want to learn more about those long dull parts." He took out a notebook and pencil and pressed for details.

She liked *Copperfield* best; she had read it six times. Dickens agreed; it was his favorite too. And next, *Great Expectations*. "We named our little yellow dog, Pip," she confided.

"Did you want to go to my Reading very much?" asked the novelist. He was thoroughly enjoying all this. Not only had he not been "Wenerables" to a little girl for many months, but never had he had so singleminded an audience.

"Yes, more than tongue can tell," said his companion, and bent her head to hide a rush of tears. She looked up after a while and was surprised to see that his eyes were wet too.

"Do you cry when you read out loud?" she asked. "We all do in our family."

"Yes," Dickens said quietly. "I always cry when I read about Steerforth."

The train was pulling in to Boston. Osgood was back.

"You are not travelling alone?" asked Dickens, reaching for his overcoat. "Oh no," replied the small one. "I had a mother, but I forgot all about her!"

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"A past-mistress of the art of flattery," said Dickens as they walked up the platform, hand in hand, toward the waiting parent.

The little girl was Katie Smith, who would become famous as Kate Douglas Wiggin. She first tells the story, which has been retold many times since, in *A Child's Journey With Dickens*. A charmingly inscribed copy of this book is in the Colby College Library.

By way of postscript, let me add the item in the Portland *Argus* of April 1st: "Dickens has come and gone . . . Now, as we cannot have Dickens again, let us do the next best thing and have Henry John Murray, Esq., who in some respects is better than Dickens." The *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of American Biography* throw no light on Mr. Murray, and I have not pursued the subject further. To those who will not be swerved from the trail of Genius I say, "Good hunting!"



### THE CROCK OF GOLD: FIFTY YEARS AFTER

By AUGUSTINE MARTIN

IT is fitting that the current revival of interest in the works of James Stephens, marked by the appearance of Lloyd Frankenberg's excellent *Selection* should coincide with the golden jubilee of *The Crock of Gold*. This remarkable fantasy appeared in 1912, when Stephens was at the height of his creative activity, and it immediately shot him into the front rank of contemporary Irish writers. It was a bad time for the making of Irish literary reputations, accompanied as it was by the rise of the two giant talents of Yeats and Joyce. Despite the immense shadows cast by these twin eminences, *The Crock of Gold* continued to glitter unobscured for the next fifty years. It is, in fact, one of the very few modern Irish prose works — perhaps the only one — to survive in print long enough to cele-