

Dickens and Crime

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MOST PEOPLE would subscribe to Dickens' own estimate of himself as the novelist who, above all others, was "laying his hand upon the time." He is still seen, at home as well as abroad, as the recognised exponent of the English character as it showed itself in Victoria's reign. The expectations that one brings to a book entitled *Dickens and Crime* are that it should be a work of sociology as well as literary exegesis. Mr. Philip Collins, Warden of Vaughan College, University of Leicester, does not disappoint one. This is a book which shows much scholarship in both fields and one can only salute and admire.

In this work, clearly a labour of love, he studies Dickens' whole literary output and seeks to trace the relationship between Dickens the creative writer and Dickens the informed critic of penal ideas. He shows how both of these were the products of the experiences of Dickens the man. Henry James' famous dictum is appropriate: "Mr. Dickens is a great observer and a great humorist, but he is nothing of a philosopher. Some people may hereupon say, so much the better; we say, so much

the worse. For a novelist very soon has need of a little philosophy." Dickens' interest in crime and penology was spasmodic and unsystematic. He lacked the requisite patience, the intellectual habits and capacity, to sustain any searching inquiry into the roots of crime or the principles of penal treatment. *Dickens and Crime* is the story of one man's struggles with his own feelings about a social problem and of how far he, who was able to externalise those feelings through the medium of creative writing, can be taken as representative of his day.

It is initially his rogues' gallery that comes to mind when we think of Dickens and crime. Fagin, Bill Sikes, the Artful Dodger, Dennis the Hangman, Abel Magwitch, are by now "archetypal" characters to the history of penology. Dickens espoused a literary tradition when he chose to write of rogues and villains, a tradition that stems from Defoe and Fielding and which, in the works of, for example, Mr. Alan Sillitoe and Mr. Frank Norman, is still very alive today. Crime and criminals not only made a readily acceptable subject for the young Dickens when he set

out to become a popular novelist, they also satisfied his own fondness for strong emotions. The unhappiness of his own boyhood gave him a sensitivity to, and a sympathy for, the social misfit and the socially deprived, that his psychological perception as an artist could utilise to the full. Sometimes the very sentiments aroused by his subject were too strong for the artist in him to control. His letters to Miss Coutts, when they were planning Urania Cottage, show greater insight and objectivity into the problems of the "fallen woman" than do his fictionalised characters of Little Em'ly and Martha.

Dickens, whose childhood security was shattered by the family misfortunes consequent upon his father's imprisonment for debt, was throughout his life haunted by the image of the prison. It originally inspired his journalist's interest in the state of the prisons of his day and thus led to his concern for the whole question of the treatment of crime and of criminals. In his creative activity we see it first as the sombre threads in *The Pickwick Papers* and from then onwards his novels abound in prisons, both in reality and as symbols. He is fascinated by the effects that confinement can have upon a man. We see this at its crudest in his study of Fagin in the condemned cell. Later, in *Little Dorrit* and *The Tale of Two Cities*, those novels about prisons

within prisons in which he sought to resolve the dualism he felt for his father, he shows what "institutionalisation" can do to the human personality. In *Great Expectations* we have Magwitch, who became a criminal because of the deprivations of his childhood, was brutalised by his experiences within the Hulks and only prospered under transportation (Dickens was much interested in the ideas and methods of Captain Maconochie). Only in *David Copperfield* is the ambivalence of humour used of prisons; the farcical episode of the reformation of Heep and Littimer in prison is used to point the cruelties as well as the absurdities of the Separate System against which he campaigned.

Dickens' interest in crime sprang from the same basic fascination with morality that preoccupies us all. In him we see it heightened by that strain of hysteria that made more dramatic the mixed repulsion and attraction with which, in common with every man, he viewed the behaviour of the wrongdoer. Mr. Collins analyses Dickens' obsession with violence and the complexity with which he presents his villains and murderers. Three of them, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Bradley Headstone and John Jasper, are all images of the ostensibly respectable well-esteemed man who has a double side to his personality. In the depiction of Headstone, this is

worked out with an almost clinical, psychiatric insight that precourses the modern concepts of diminished responsibility. The others are cruder, more Jekyll-and-Hyde characters and suggest that the ambivalence with which Dickens pursued such causes as the abolition of capital punishment reflected a deeply fundamental split within his own nature.

As Mr. Collins says, "we are all floggers and hangers not far under the skin." Just how far under may depend upon our own needs for retributive punishment. In Dickens the compromise between the need for patience, intelligence and charity in dealing with social deviants and the need to satisfy the inner demands of wounded and outraged feeling was ever an uneasy one. Dickens became noticeably less radical as he grew older. Not only was this due to the normal tendencies to conservatism that age seems to bring, it was related to the satisfactions and frustrations that he experienced in his search for personal happiness and social success. Mr. Collins' account of the famous "Sikes and Nancy" readings that obsessed Dickens' later years illumines significantly the tortuous development that had taken place within the perceptive young author of the 1841 preface to *Oliver Twist*.

Dickens did not write of crime with any consistent or thought-out views on free-will and determinism,

or moral responsibility, or such-like issues. He wrote of criminals because they appealed to the artist's imagination in him and because their problems appealed to the interested social thinker in him. But more than that, they afforded him a vehicle for a more fundamental and personally challenging issue—what is it that society demands from an individual in the pressures it puts upon him to conform? When Henry James himself came to write on this great theme he produced, in *The Princess Casamassima*, the most "Dickensian" of all his novels.

Dickens and Crime by Phillip Collins is published by Macmillan. (pp 371) at 35s. 0d.

The Council of Europe's Committee on Crime Problems has published "*The Death Penalty in European Countries*".

"*Twentieth Century*" in its Winter 1962 issue has articles on 'What's wrong with Justice, Jails, Police and Crime' including 'Britain's New Criminals' (Hugh Klare) 'In the Nick' (Terence Morris) and 'The Borstal Boys' by Alan Little.