

Characters at Dickens's Reading
 Harper's Weekly
 April 25, 1868



Charles Dickens in Philadelphia
 The Public Readings
 January & February 1868



"Mr. Dickens read scenes from his printed books. From my distance he was a small and slender figure, rather fancifully dressed, and striking and picturesque in appearance. He wore a black velvet coat with a large and glaring red flower in the buttonhole. He stood under a red upholstered shed behind whose slant was a row of strong lights -- just such an arrangement as artists use to concentrate a strong light upon a great picture. Dickens's audience sat in a pleasant twilight, while he performed in the powerful light cast upon him from the concealed lamps. He read with great force and animation, in the lively passages, and with stirring effect. It will be understood that he did not merely read but also acted. His reading of the storm scene in which Steerforth lost his life was so vivid and so full of energetic action that his house was carried off its feet, so to speak."

-Mark Twain

Dickens came to the United States in 1868 for a reading tour. He gave 76 readings in the States and earned 20,000 pounds. In January and February he appeared in Philadelphia at The Concert Hall at 1217 Chestnut Street. This building was fifty feet wide, had a stone block facing and three high arched windows in the front. Tickets were \$2 each. Philadelphia acted much the same way that it acts today when tickets for an important rock concert go on sale. The night before the tickets were to be sold, 50 people were camped out on the sidewalk in the 18-degree cold, securely established with mattresses, blankets and whiskey.

The first six readings were sold out in four hours. Hundreds of people were disappointed and scalpers, who managed to get their hands on tickets, resold them for exorbitant prices. The Concert Hall could only hold 1,400 people.

Nevertheless, the newspapers of the day reported the "the audience could not have been more select," it comprised of "the elite of the city" and seldom had the same number of persons, representing every department of literature, art, science and business, and the better class of society, been assembled at a place of amusement in this city."

There were many reasons why Philadelphians wanted to see Dickens: he was a famous writer and he had brought about reform, but a major reason was that they were forewarned that he was an extraordinary performer. The Philadelphia Press had already printed articles about him that described him as a "brilliant reader, a master of histrionic art, and a luminary of the European platform."

During all his Philadelphia readings Dickens had what he called an "intolerable cold." But his audiences did not suspect anything was amiss. Indeed the Evening Bulletin of February 14 noted, "Mr. Dickens was evidently in the best of humors." Little did they know how enormously high Dickens worked up his pulse, so intense were his readings.

He had advertised for six readings in Concert Hall. On Monday, January 13th he read *A Christmas Carol* and *The Trial from Pickwick*. On Tuesday the 14th it was from *David Copperfield* and *Mr. Bob Sawyer's Party* from Pickwick. On Thursday, January 23rd he read *At Mr. Squeers' School* from *Nicholas Nickleby* and *the Boots at the Holly Tree Inn*. The next night he read his story of *Little Dombey* and repeated *The Trial from Pickwick*. The next week on Thursday, January 30th, the choices were *Doctor Marigold* and *Mr. Bob Sawyer's Party* and on the last advertised reading he selected *David Copperfield* and *Boots at the Holly Tree Inn*. The readings started at 8:00 each evening and lasted about two hours.

The stage setting was simple and had been designed by Dickens. A maroon screen ran along the back extending to the wings. A carpet was on the floor to assist with the acoustics. Above Dickens's head was a row of gas jets which illuminated him and his books, but which were screened so that they threw no glare into the audience's eyes. A reading desk, about two feet by three feet and three feet high held his books, a pitcher of water and a glass. Illuminated by the bright lights, framed and thrown into relief by the dark backdrop, and obstructed little by the table and its appointments, he could register on the audience every movement in all his body. The Inquirer called the arrangement, "a model of convenience and a gem of invention."

At 8:00 sharp, Dickens would walk onto the stage, without any announcement. He carried the books quickly to his reading desk, put the books down, bowed, smiled and waited for the applause to stop. It was a long wait. He wanted to begin, but the normally reserved Philadelphians lauded him with cheer after cheer and roar after roar. When at last the audience had shown their approval, he would pick up a book, open it, look at the audience and say, ""Ladies and gentlemen, I am happy to have the honor of reading to you tonight," name the work and begin reading.

The audiences, expecting a lengthy introduction, overtures and pomp and flourishes were at first taken aback, but very quickly Charles Dickens vanished from the stage and his characters took his place. One moment he would be old gruff old Scrooge, and the next he would be timid Bob Cratchit, then hearty, good-natured Fred. His years of theatrical training, from the toy theatre of his childhood, through the amateur theatricals were paying off.

Frederick Trautmann in his paper on Public Readings records that Philadelphians saw in Dickens a reader expressive in each glance and every movement. His manner, though conversational, was active, flexible, varied, and emphatic. He could convey pathos, fun, tenderness, or caricature with equal force. Most expressive were his eyes and his hands – but especially his eyes. The Press of January 24 admired "his eyes, wonderful eyes they are," that - as the story and the character demand-droop, gleam, shine, blaze, and glare. Performing mostly from memory, Dickens seldom referred to his text and his eloquent eyes were continually on the audience.

When reading *A Christmas Carol*, he used his hands and his eyes to describe the dancing at Fezziwig's ball, and put his whole self into the mashing of the potatoes, the sweetening of the applesauce, and the dusting of the plates-as if he were there and taking part.

The Evening Telegraph reported that when Buzfuz cried, "Call Sam Weller" that Dickens had to stop "for some minutes, so deafening was the welcome."

For his reading from *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens did not enlist that worthy actor, Vincent Crummies, but instead chose the high-spirited encounter with John Browdie, the pathos of Smike and the scene that ended with Nicholas thrashing Squeers, with, as one reviewer commented, "startling reality."

On January 15th a reviewer for the Philadelphia Inquirer described the second evening:

ANOTHER GREAT READING

David Copperfield - Bob Sawyer's Party
"MICAWBER DEPICTED TO THE LIFE

He waits for Something to "Turn Up"
UNFORTUNATE PICKWICK AGAIN
Audience Convulsed with Laughter

Dickens was going up and down the East Coast at this point. He returned to Philadelphia for two final evenings...February 13th he read *A Christmas Carol* and on the 14th he read *Dr. Marigold* and *The Trial from Pickwick*. Dickens wrote, "Philadelphia audiences ready and bright...I think they understood the 'Carol' better than 'Copperfield,' but they were bright and responsive to both."

Dickens made far more money doing the readings (about 45,000 pounds), than all of his books combined. And of course, the readings made the public go out and buy more of the books. But I think what was even more important to Dickens than the money was the applause.

He once said of audiences: "There's nothing in the world equal to seeing the house rise at you, one sea of delightful faces, one hurrah of applause!"