DICKENS VS. AMERICA
Matthew Pearl
Published in More Intelligent Life (Economist), March 2014

I.

June 14, 1870, Charles Dickens's coffin was lowered into Westminster Abbey. As the world mourned one of the most beloved authors in history, there were some who blamed Dickens's decline on the grueling American reading tour a year and a half earlier. Today Americans remember the hotel rooms where Dickens slept, the restaurants where he dined, and the mirror he used to practice his readings, of which it is said staring for a long time reveals his reflection. But had America killed Charles Dickens?

No. Though it may not have been a wise decision to make the long trip, Dickens's strength had been fading well before his 1867 departure from Liverpool for Boston, plagued by a lame left foot and weak spells. Still, the reflex to blame Dickens's death on the United States' demands on him reflects an influential and peculiar dynamic between the author and the New World.

In the nineteenth century, publishing battles raged between Great Britain and the United States. American publishers reprinted British books at will due to a loophole in the American copyright law. Until 1891, the law would provide no protection for intellectual property created by non-citizens of the United States. Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson and other popular British writers lost untold amounts of income as American publishers profited. American writers, too, were commercial losers at home, being nearly priced out of the market. A book of poetry by Longfellow or Poe at one dollar would compete with a twenty-five cent novel by Dickens or Thackeray.

It was an intellectual property war every bit as fierce as today's DVD black market in China. American publishers would send their agents to roam the wharves in New York, Philadelphia and Boston to attempt to intercept popular manuscripts coming in by ship. Across the Atlantic, English customs officials would search passenger ships coming from the States to confiscate pirated British books as contraband.

Dickens found himself in an awkward spot, torn between his financial interests and his fame—both of which he was savvy and possessive about. Though he did not receive royalties from his American sales, the inexpensive prices fueled his books and serials to circulate through all classes of the United States—which may have even helped strengthen literacy in the process. When thirty-year old Dickens traveled for the first time to America in 1841, he reported that “there never was a king or Emperor upon the Earth, so cheered, and followed by crowds.”

Dickens was a man who relished adulation, and his fame in the already celebrity-driven United States even exceeded what he experienced back home.

Dickens had been looking forward to visiting the United States, a nation that represented ideals of equality, democracy and liberalism that stirred Dickens's innate social sympathies. Likewise, the fact that Dickens had built himself from nothing—while most American writers had to have independent wealth because of the hole the copyright law put authors in—was inspirational to the public and the press in the U.S.

As he traveled across the States, Dickens delivered speeches calling for the adoption of international copyright and brought along a petition to the same effect. It would have seemed beyond question to Dickens that right-thinking American audiences would rise with him to fight the unfairness of the legal system. But he had overlooked the severe economic crunch America had just gone through, with bank crises and shaky national confidence. In addition, part of what the crowds celebrated in Dickens—his international success—made agitation for more profit and success unseemly to many fans. It seemed to be plain greed. The American press, particularly in New York, felt backed into a corner after feting the English visitor with lavish dinners because a portion of them relied on the free British content to fill their pages. The editors stoked the public reaction to Dickens's calls for change: he had come as a financial mercenary, they cried, a “hired agent” of British interests. Walt Whitman, one of the New York editors, even ran a letter supposedly written by Dickens roundly abusing the United States (the letter was a forgery, though it more or less accurately represented Dickens's emerging feelings).

When Dickens published a critical book about his American travels upon his return to England, the sense that he had made the trip only for financial gain gained further traction. His London publisher Chapman & Hall had in fact financed part of his trip so that he could write the travelogue, but the firestorm about Dickens's perceived greed in the columns and cartoons of American papers, and the incident of the forged letter, had darkened Dickens's mood. American Notes was mostly a dry account of divergent aspects of American life, but it was harsh on slavery and outraged at the “abject state” of the press. After rapidly dispatching his travel book, the always restless Dickens began a new novel, Martin Chuzzlewit.

The pirating across the Atlantic continued at a fierce clip. One newspaper in New York published a special supplement edition of American Notes—and cleverly gave it away for free to ensure that American Dickens fans heard his criticisms of the nation that gave him such a warm welcome only months before. The New World weekly warned readers of Notes: “It will ruin Mr. Dickens's personal popularity altogether with us.” When Martin Chuzzlewit began its serial run, this too was widely printed without compensation to Dickens. It is worth noting that although then and now we'd label this pirating, it was not. Because there was no copyright for foreigners, it broke no law for newspapers and publishers to print their work. However repellent to our ideas

of intellectual property, this was only pirating from a rhetorical standpoint. Aggrieved parties could resort to no court.

Dickens had his own plan. As Chuzzlewit began its run, he was increasingly irritated by what he saw as the unfair treatment of American Notes in the U.S. press. It is easy to forget in an on-demand age what serializing a novel entailed. It did not mean an existing novel was broken down into parts and gradually released. Usually, writers like Dickens were composing pretty furiously to keep just a few installments ahead of what the public was reading. As a result, writers could change their plan for the book based on any number of factors—the opinions of friends or fans, current events, or even weak sales.

Dickens had another purpose in mind as he stewed over the reviews of Notes. Martin Chuzzlewit was a family melodrama, about young Martin trying to make his way without the help of his grandfather of the same name. Suddenly, Martin decides to search out his fortune with his friend Mark by going to the United States. The misadventures that ensued lambasted American manners, customs and the very press that was pirating these chapters, chapters that accused U.S. editors of forgery. The battle with America had just managed to rewrite a Dickens novel.

Dickens had had his revenge on his enemies, but at a cost.

II.

By using his serial novel Martin Chuzzlewit to satisfy his sense of justice, hitting American critics and publishing pirates, Dickens had also alienated his large fan base of U.S. Readers.

From that point forward, Dickens would choose avoidance rather than confrontation. Having been disappointed by American values and politics that from afar he had believed inspiring, Dickens focused his energies on concrete social issues closer to home—like the plight of industrial workers depicted in Hard Times and the betterment of prostitutes—and refused to negotiate with American publishers for advance sheets of his novels. Because American publishers printing British books couldn't prevent regional competitors from printing the same book, the race to publish put a value on receiving the text of a book first. Grudgingly, British authors would accept small fees to provide advance sheets, but this type of profit now seemed undignified to Dickens.

The public fight had not benefited anyone, much less Dickens himself. Martin Chuzzlewit sold rather poorly for a Dickens novel in England, not helped by its use as a platform for grudges that would have been less than gripping to the British public. Dickens also did not pursue further agitation on the issue of international copyright from this point on. He entered a sort of unspoken truce with the American editors and public. The large format weekly newspapers in New York

that specialized in reprinting British novels had weakened or closed by the mid-1840s because of changes to the marketplace. The relentless criticism of Dickens by editors trickled off, and readers remained hungry for more Dickens.

Interestingly, as Dickens's life evolved at the most private level, the country that now seemed a world away would once again become relevant. Dickens's increasingly tense relationship with his wife had come to loggerheads, and after a tumultuous series of private mediations, Catherine Dickens was banished from their Rochester estate. There would be no divorce initiated, as this would have jeopardized Dickens's reputation as a writer of "household harmony" (one of the suggestions for the title of Dickens's magazine). Catherine lived in a separate house in London with a monthly stipend from her husband. Though arrangements were murky for many years, Dickens also paid for Ellen Ternan, a young actress, and possibly her mother and sister, to live nearby. Meanwhile, Dickens's adult children were an enormous drain. Of his six sons surviving into the mid-1860s, four were spread out in around the world and all required some degree of financial support—even his namesake, Charles Dickens, Jr., had gone through bankruptcy before holding down a steady post working at Dickens's magazine.

His family life spiraling out of control and becoming complicated beyond even his own understanding, Dickens could not help but think about the adulation of America—however excessive and hypersensitive it might sometimes be. He began to feel a new pull that seemed to him like a pull toward martyrdom. "Expenses are so enormous," Dickens told his sister-in-law Georgina, "that I begin to feel myself drawn towards America, as Darnay in the Tale of Two Cities was attracted to the Loadstone Rock, Paris." At the same time, hints of health problems gradually increased in the ever-vigorous and athletic Dickens.

The last time he had gone to America, the financial value of the trip had been indirect—research for a book and lobbying for legal change that would have brought him even more money. By the 1860s, Dickens had developed and perfected through trial and error readings of his books for which British audiences would eagerly line up buy tickets. Prior to this point in literary history, audiences were accustomed to authors reading in monotone, looking down at the page. Dickens transformed himself into his famous characters before the audience's eyes.

Theatrical managers from every quarter promised Dickens huge profits from an American tour. After a delay due to the Civil War, Dickens left for the States with an entourage of assistants. This time, there would be no attempted proselytizing about international copyright and no books written about the country. Instead, the money-making would be out in the open for anyone to see. There was still some residual resentment from Dickens's first trip, and much speculation about his home and love life, but for the most part tension came only from over-exuberance by those who wanted to get closer to him or exploit his popularity for their own profit. Dickens would

also add a postscript to American Notes and Martin Chuzzlewit brushing aside old differences in favor of expressing his “love and thankfulness” to the States.

Dickens made so much money as he toured the country—38,000 pounds from seventy-six readings before 115,000 people—that his manager carried cash around in paper bags like laundry and they began to be harassed by rogue tax agents during this age of impeachment and turmoil in Washington D.C.

America hadn't killed Dickens after all, America was bailing Dickens out. At least, that had been part of Dickens's vision for it. When Dickens died a year and a half after his trip, more than 20% of his estate's assets had come from his American reading tour.

Though there would be no mention of the United States in the novel Dickens began after his return to England—*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*—Dickens long history of tug-of-war with the States was not quite done when he left its shores for the last time.  No doubt Dickens had resigned himself to the fact that there would be no international copyright in his lifetime. But he could not give up what he saw as his rights to the fruits of his creative output.

Dickens announced that Boston publisher Fields, Osgood & Co., in return for their sponsorship of his tour, would be *Drood*'s authorized American publisher and it was arranged that he would receive royalties from book sales. This had not been done before. The arrangement for *Drood* sparked such debate in the American press that it was dubbed the Dickens Controversy, and riled the publishing pirates. Dickens had not changed the laws, as he once hoped, and had not changed the people, but had found a way at last for his fame in America to enhance his personal position and challenge the status quo of a fledgling industry.

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was not only Dickens's last, but was poised to be the first step in a new phase of cultural balance between Great Britain and the States. He died in the middle of writing it. As American editor Henry Ward Beecher eulogized of Dickens, “To die upon the field of battle, and in the hour of victory, has always been esteemed a crowning good fortune.”