

BEGINNINGS: FROM PRESS BOX TO *SKETCHES BY BOZ* : 1829 to 1836

A brief period working on reporting the legal proceedings at Doctors' Commons ended in 1831 when Dickens followed his father on to the staff of *The Mirror of Parliament*, a journal owned by his uncle John Henry Barrow. It reported Parliamentary proceedings, and was a more accurate record than Hansard, since it made use of direct, on-the-spot, reporting, rather than transcribing from other publications. He wrote to Wilkie Collins on 6 June 1856 about his experiences at this time that 'I left the reputation behind me of being the best and most rapid Reporter ever known... I could do anything in that way under any sort of circumstances – and often did.'

These were exciting times for Parliamentary activity: the debates leading to the Great Reform Act of 1832, and its associated social legislation, discussions over Catholic Emancipation, over the abolition of slave labour in the colonies and so on. Dickens rapidly became, according to a fellow journalist, 'universally considered the rapidest and most accurate shorthand reporter in the gallery', and he was often consulted on points of detail because the precision of young Mr Dickens's reporting was well-known. The work was seasonal, bringing in 15 guineas a week when he was working, and providing him with the time to embark on writing sketches of London life, which began to appear in print from 1833. In 1834 he began work on a more regular basis, though a lower salary, for the *Morning Chronicle*.

When reviewing this period of his early life in chapter 53 of *David Copperfield*, he describes himself like this:

I have come legally to man's estate. I have attained the dignity of twenty-one. But this is a sort of dignity that may be thrust upon one. Let me think what I have achieved.

I have tamed that savage stenographic mystery. I make a respectable income by it. I am in high repute for my accomplishment in all pertaining to the art, and am joined with eleven others in reporting the debates in Parliament for a Morning Newspaper. Night after night, I record predictions that never come to pass, professions that are never fulfilled, explanations that are only meant to mystify. I wallow in words. Britannia, that unfortunate female, is always before me, like a trussed fowl: skewered through and through with office-pens, and bound hand and foot with red tape. I am sufficiently behind the scenes to know the worth of political life. I am quite an Infidel about it, and shall never be converted.

Even as he was reporting the activities of Parliament, he was picking up the potential for comic observation and satirical point.

As well as working for *The Mirror of Parliament*, he wrote for *The True Sun*, and reported debates on the abolition of slavery and the passage of the great Reform Bill of 1832: the atmosphere must have been electric. He travelled up and down the country by stagecoach, especially reporting on the proceedings of the first elections after the new reformed Parliament came into being. He served the Whig (Liberal) *The Morning Chronicle* from 1834 to 1836, employed as a staff reporter at 5 guineas a week. Whilst working for *The Morning Chronicle* he was sent to Edinburgh to cover the celebrations put on in honour of Earl Grey, the great Whig statesman responsible for the 1832 Reform Act.

By this time, he had already tried his hand at fiction, producing a piece called ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’, which he submitted, nervously, to *The Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. It was accepted and published, anonymously, setting in motion the series of Sketches about London and its life, brilliantly-observed and captured, which eventually came to be published under his pseudonym as *Sketches by Boz*. They had been published in various magazines and newspapers since 1833 and collected together as *Sketches by Boz* in 1836. In them he describes London scenes, places, activities and characters with a wicked eye for humorous observation and a depth of detail which makes the writing crackle. When John Forster reviewed the Sketches, he wrote that they showed ‘the first sprightly runnings of his (Dickens’s) genius’. In his evocation of this vibrant early nineteenth-century London he was helped by the visualisation done of it by his illustrator, George Cruikshank who was already a well-established artist with a reputation for London scenes, and who also later illustrated *Oliver Twist*.

In many ways, the *Sketches* continue the approach found in 18th century journals such as Steele’s *The Tatler*, Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Bee*, Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*, and *Idler*, with all of which Dickens was familiar. All these titles have something in common: a sense of relaxed curiosity and observation of life. Similar approaches are taken in Dickens’s *Sketches* but he also develops distinctly new approaches when dealing with social criticism, sometimes quite grimly observed, which foreshadow the way his career will develop.