What the Dickens is Wrong in Yankeedoodledom?

An Inquiry into Charles Dickens' "Quarrel with America."

by Bill Kitchens

An oldfashionedhistory™ by Bill Kitchens

“Martin Chuzzlewit!” You got a problem with that?

These days, that name brings only puzzled looks to the faces of most Americans. There was a time though, when the name ‘Martin Chuzzlewit’ “made all Yankeedoodledom fizz like one universal soda water bottle” Who, or what, was this ‘Martin Chuzzlewit’ that Americans were so mindful of him? An “exceedingly foolish libel”, a foul canard hurled from across the sea – or a mirror reflecting the soul of a nation? In fact, Martin Chuzzlewit was the hapless protagonist of Charles Dickens’ novel of that name, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which America figured prominently, but not positively.

That was the second, and cruelest, slap to young America’s face by Dickens in his curious, one sided ‘quarrel with America’. Oh, and what a slap! Dickens was a Grand Master of the artful insult; even a century and a half later the BBC tactfully glossed over Chuzzlewit’s American misadventures in their dramatization of the novel aired on American Public Television.

Dickens, “Boz” as he was fondly known, had been loved, and even idolized, on this side of the Atlantic. Loved not only as a brilliant writer, but for exposing before all the world the hypocrisy and evil of the old country’s class prejudice and exploitation. As English bashing was a favorite pastime of Americans in the era of “Fifty-four forty or fight” war fever with England over the Oregon boundary – wasn’t he one of us?

That friendly perception was scuttled soon after Dickens and his wife, Catherine, visited the US in 1842. Immediately upon returning home, Dickens penned a travelogue, *American Notes*, full of lofty disdain and biting, albeit hilarious, caricature of American backwardness and braggadocio. Typical is the comment “Pittsburgh is like Birmingham in England, at least its townspeople say so. Setting aside the streets, the shops, the houses, wagons, factories, public buildings, and population perhaps it may be.”

The capitol of our grand republic fared even worse in Dickens’ esteem, dismissed as the “City of Magnificent Intentions” (unlikely ever to be realized), and “the headquarters of tobacco tinctured saliva”.

A fitting capitol, as he saw it, for a congress whose chief preoccupation seemed to be firing tobacco juice at spittoons, with such poor results as to make the Englishman “doubt that general proficiency with the rifle of which we have heard so much of in England.”

Not only was he unimpressed with our political leaders’ marksmanship, he was unimpressed with their heads as well. “I was sometimes asked...whether I had been...much impressed by the ‘heads’ of the lawmakers in Washington; meaning not their chiefs and leaders, but literally their individual and personal heads, whereon their hair grew, and whereby the phrenological character of each legislator was expressed, and I almost as often struck my questioner dumb with indignant consternation by answering ‘No, that I didn’t remember being at all overcome.”

In fairness to Mr. Dickens, I should point out that he added “I do not remember ever fainting away, or having been moved to tears of joyful pride at the sight of any legislative body. I have borne the House of Commons like a man, and have yielded to no weakness but slumber in the House of Lords.”

Worse even than his lack of unbounded admiration for our heads of state was his abysmally low opinion of our national pride and joy, the Mighty Mississippi, “great father of rivers, who (Praise be to Heaven!) has no young children like him.” An “enormous ditch...running liquid mud” was his kindest description. Still, one could imagine Dickens saying those things with a slight smile, and he actually did manage a few compliments in *American Notes*. Not so with *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Everyone was taken aback when *Chuzzlewit* came out a couple of years later; as if Dickens had brooded on some injury and finally boiling over, poured out his anger into whatever vessel was handy. The title character’s ill fated sojourn in the United States was such a contrived appendage to the story as to leave no doubt that Dickens went out of his way to scorch American pride.

What, exactly, so offended Dickens is something of a mystery; probably many things taken together.

Certainly one thing was his failure to nudge the US into recognizing British copyrights. Dickens profited little from his popularity in this country because of literary piracy. An ardent abolitionist, the continued existence of slavery in the United States disappointed him greatly. Then too, their journey, especially in the ‘west’, across the Alleghenies, and the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers was difficult. Charles had suffered extreme hardships and privation in his youth, his writings about the misery of the poor English working class were semi-autobiographical. But his had been urban hardship, not rural, much less the rigors of the frontier, and they were alien and frightening experiences; even more so to his well bred wife. Perhaps the hardships had been more than the trip was worth.

Charles Dickens at the time of his first journey to the United States, and his wife, Catherine.

From the hilariously harrowing stagecoach ride to the canal boat where “the passengers were the library, ...to be arranged edgewise on...shelves till morning”, travel and accommodations were primitive and harsh, taking a terrible toll on the couple. It was probably the American people though, who took the greatest toll on the travelers.

Then, as now, America didn’t worship its idols from a respectful distance. America was in his face from the start. Newspapers dogged him, strangers gawked at him, even touched him, and discussed his “personal appearance” among themselves “with as much indifference as if I were a stuffed figure” (“I never gained so much uncompromising information with reference to my own nose and eyes, ...and how my head looks from behind as on these occasions”) He complained that “Many a budding president has walked into my room with his cap on his head and his hands in his pockets, and stared at me for two whole hours, occasionally refreshing himself with a tweak at his nose or a draught from the water jug”.

One wonders why Dickens sat still for such invasions of his privacy; but, with his constant references to our proclivity to violence, he may simply have been afraid. Yet, with all the unpleasantness of his visit notwithstanding, there seemed to be something more involved in the latter book's near hysterical attack upon this country. Perhaps one reason can be inferred from the author's aside during Mrs. Hominy's absurd, jingoistic tirade on the exhausted, sleeping Martin Chuzzlewit. Americans, Dickens huffed, were:

"...as senseless to the high principles on which America sprang, a nation, into life...[putting] in hazard the rights of nations yet unborn, and [the] progress of the human race, ...[as] are the swine who wallow in her streets. Who think that crying out to other nations, old in iniquity, 'We are no worse than you!' (No worse!) is high defense and vantage ground enough for that Republic, but yesterday let loose upon her noble course, and but today so maimed and lame, so full of ulcers, foul to the eye and almost hopeless to the sense, that her best friends turn from the loathsome creature with disgust."

Whew! I'd better stop right now, before Yankeedoodledom begins to fizz all over again. Thank goodness for the "almost hopeless", or one could easily become pessimistic over the future of the great 'American Experiment'. Obviously Mr. Dickens, the great social reformer, had already succumbed to a bit of pessimism – and that tells us quite a bit about both Charles Dickens and the United States of America.

This country bore a great burden in Dickens' eyes – nothing less than the future of humanity! In this age when no one, even the bloodiest tyrant, openly disputes the moral imperatives of personal liberty, equality, and democratic government (the worst of them camouflage themselves as 'Peoples' Democratic Republics') we tend to forget that in the 1840's such concepts were still very much in doubt. The world watched the US to learn if, as Lincoln would later put it, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" could long endure. And the watching world was not all of one mind in its hope.

It's clear where Dickens' hope lay of course, but we were so bitterly disappointing to him. "This is not the republic of my imagination." he confessed.

The United States, despite two bitter wars between them, was still close to the mother country in many ways. We were perceived by a segment of the English gentry as an offshoot, a scion, of their own best traditions grafted into the New World. They expected it to bring to fruition all their loftiest ideals which the gnarled, rotten old stump refused to bear. The success or failure of the 'American Experiment' was an intensely personal matter to Dickens.

G. K. Chesterton, another Englishman not known for his consideration for Yankee sensibilities, observed of Dickens' anger: "...with America he could feel, and fear. There he could hate, because there he could love. There he could feel not the past alone nor the present, but the future also, and he was afraid of it." But, as Chesterton points out, Dickens was a man given to cynicism, one given to fears that things were always going to get worse.

And he was young when he landed on out shores, just turning thirty during the visit. He was also accustomed to a more comfortable life style, and a very different social order. Though an avowed champion of social equality, he was not at all in favor of social familiarity, a distinction lost on the masses of American society.

Young, impatient, idealistic yet aloof; it's not surprising that he would have been disappointed by the work in progress that was America. Perhaps Martin Chuzzlewit was Dickens. Chuzzlewit was a would be architect of great cities, with a disdain for the steerage class pilgrims an unkind fate had placed him with in his passage to America. Dickens was a social architect with a disdain for the mud bricks of which our society was built.

Dickens exquisitely renders the hopes, the longings and the excitement of the poor passengers stuffed below deck in the 'economy section', even the seasick Martin Chuzzelwit, as the *Screw,* ..."that noble and fast sailing line of packet ship" enters American waters.

Then America rudely greets them: "Here's this morning's *New York Sewer*" cries one of the legions of newsboys scrambling aboard from the pilot boat. "Here's this morning's *New York Stabber*! Here's the *New York Family Spy*!...the *New York Peeper*!…

the *Keyhole Reporter*!...the *Rowdy Journal*! Here's all the New York papers!" they cried. "Here's the *Sewer*'s exposure of the Wall Street gang, and the *Sewer*'s exposure of the Washington gang, and the *Sewer*'s exclusive account of a flagrant act of dishonesty committed by the Secretary of State when he was eight years old; now communicated, at great expense, by his own nurse...Here's the wide awake *Sewer*, always on the lookout; the leading journal of the United States..." (one detects a slight bitterness towards a prying press in this satirical fusillade).

Martin was quite lost in this new, bustling environment, and quite obviously so. Observing this, Col. Driver, the editor of the *New York Rowdy Journal*, quickly took him in hand and introduced him to "some of the most remarkable men in our country" – Mr. Jefferson Brick, Major Pawkins, General Choke, Mr. LaFayette Kettle; and at least one lady of distinction, Mrs. Hominy. That these characters were unflattering caricatures is obvious, but unlike the book's most famous denizen, Pecksniff (whose name has become an adjective describing pernicious hypocrisy), they are caricatures of national ideas and conventions rather than of individual human foibles; "absurd opinions walking about" as Chesterton put it.

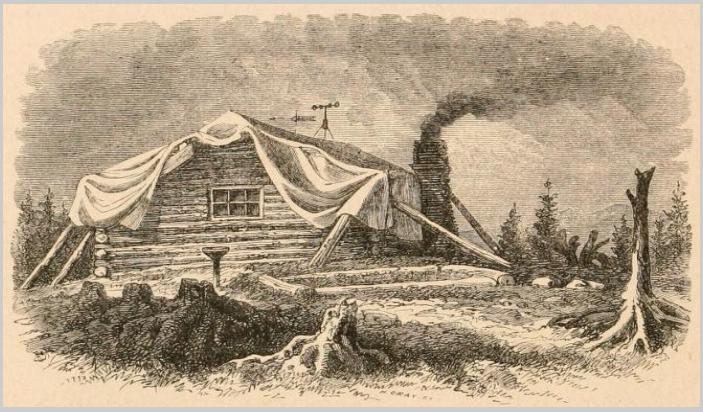
Major Pawkins, for instance, was a rising political star who "could chew more tobacco, smoke more, drink more, ...this made him an orator and a man of the people". Mrs. Hominy, on the other hand, "a writer of reviews and analytical disquisitions" was a prime example of the intellectual and literary richness of the republic. After observing that "they corrupt even the language in that old country!" she proceeded to regale Chuzzlewit for hours on end with the virtues of the new and the vices of the old, all the while murdering the King's English as if that were striking a blow for liberty and equality. Martin soon dozed off into a bad dream.

Huckstered by these "remarkable men" the hapless Englishman's nightmares soon became reality. He bought into "Eden" and packed off there with his few belongings and high hopes. "Eden", as you might have suspected, was a fever swamp from which no one had ever returned. This fiasco was Martin's punishment for being upper class, and for seeing through his hosts' pretensions, yet naive and blinded by his own ambitions, being at their mercy.

You will be glad to know that Dickens did write a happy ending for his wandering young Englishman – he escaped Eden and returned home a good deal wiser for the experience.

Dickens claimed to have based everything in *Martin Chuzzlewit* on fact and his own observations. And there were prying, muckraking journalists, pretentious backwoods philosophers, demagogic politicians, and land swindlers galore. And it happens that Dickens' description of "Eden" is exactly like a place he described in *American Notes:*

> At the juncture of the two rivers, on ground so flat and low and marshy that at certain times of the year it is inundated to the housetops, lies a breeding place of fever, ague, and death: vaunted in England as a mine of golden hope, and speculated in, on the faith of monstrous representations, to many people's ruin. A dismal swamp, on which the half built houses rot away; cleared here and there for the space of a few yards; and teeming, then, with rank, unwholesome vegetation, in whose baleful shade the wretched wanderers who are tempted hither droop, and die, and lay lay their bones; the hateful Mississippi circling and eddying before it, and turning off upon its southern course, a slimy monster hideous to behold; a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulcher, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality in earth or air or water to commend it: and such a place is Cairo."



Dickens, too, escaped his "Eden" and returned home, probably carrying bad dreams of laying his bones by the "hateful Mississippi". Time passed however, the fizz died down and America forgave Dickens and repeatedly asked him back. He was content, though, to observe our goings on from a distance, tossing us an "I told you so" at every opportunity, and there were plenty of those.

Finally, a quarter century later, lured by lucrative lecture prospects, he returned to these shores. By the end of his tour (after grossing around a quarter of a million dollars which, no doubt, put him in a better frame of mind), he too had forgiven and was ready to end the "quarrel".

In 1868, at a public dinner given by the New York press, of all people, he made his peace with America declaring:

"...how astounded I have been by the amazing changes I have seen around me on every side, changes moral, changes physical, changes in the amount of land subdued and peopled, changes in the rise of vast new cities, changes in the growth of older cities...changes in the graces and amenities of life, changes in the Press...nor am I, believe me, so arrogant as to suppose that in five and twenty years there have been no changes in me, and that I had nothing to learn and no extreme impressions to correct when I was here first"

"Boz" concluded his remarks with the promise that this testimony putting to rest his "quarrel with America" would henceforth be appended to both books as "an act of plain justice and honor."

I think this episode was best summed up by Dickens' sentiments in a personal letter, sentiments which can only be understood by those who have viewed life from the vantage point of age, "it all seems immensely more difficult to understand than it was when I was here before."

Epilogue:

Dickens, like many of today's younger generations, had little or no understanding of the character of the American people or of frontier life – and little sympathy for either. "Eden", that is Cairo, Ill., had had a terrible set back just as Dickens visited. Only a little later, the effort to build a city there at the juncture of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers was recapitalized (yes, both capital and labor built America) and hardy settlers once again dared that "hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulcher, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality in earth or air or water to commend it." And many of them laid their bones there, but with faith in God, themselves, and a future beyond themselves they created a prosperous city, surrounded by massive levies, and beyond that millions of acres of prime farmland.

Cairo, above, as it appeared in 1885 during its heyday. Shortly after Dickens' visit, it began its comeback to life and prosperity. As the first city on the Mississippi above the Mason-Dixon Line, it was "The Promised Land" for fugitive slaves. Then it was an important supply center for the Union Army in the Civil War. Dickens could never foresee that, and too many of us have forgotten the countless triumphs, and the sacrifices, like that which built America. Sadly Cairo has long since fallen into decline, but that is not the fault of those who long ago had a vision for it and made their vision come true.

And perhaps the older Dickens was a bit more tolerant of the failings of others, having by that time a few of his own. Long before returning to America he had deserted his wife and their ten children for an actress. A bit of self evaluation is good for the character, even in the young. But the young today are not encouraged to do that, but only to condemn the evils of past generations – real and imagined.

Indeed the traditional yardsticks by which one once measured his character – the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, have been banned in so far as the Liberal/Left has had the power to effect.

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