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ACADEMIA NACIONAL DE
HISTORIA Y GEOGRAFÍA/UNAM
1925-2025

Dirección de Literatura

LECTURAS DEL CENTENARIO
Número 47

Winning Our Applause

ESSAYS ON HISTORY

(Primera parte)

STEPHEN MURRAY KIERNAN

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Lecturas del Centenario de la
Academia Nacional de
Historia y Geografía/UNAM

NÚMERO 47

Ciudad de México
Enero 2025

Winning Our Applause: Essays on History

Stephen Murray Kiernan

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Winning Our Applause

Essays on History

William Lamport – The One-Man Rebellion in Mexico

A long-standing thorn in the side of the inquisition in Mexico City, William Lamport (or Guillen de Lampart), was finally executed through the method of excruciatingly painful fire in 1659. There is a report however that states that he actually managed to strangle himself before the flames could kill him by slowly devouring his feet, legs and then torso. He had spent almost all of the last two decades of his life in the miserable cells of this religious institution, only at one point in the middle of his incarceration – and then only for a few hours – being able to escape and through some type of marvellous stubbornness using a lot of his time to leave semi-legible notices proclaiming the venality and deception of the officers of the inquisition. This episode on its own speaks of a man very much worth knowing.

Born in the beautiful county of Wexford to a Catholic family of some wealth and local importance, there seems to have been from the start a strong force of ambition and perhaps a driving sense of destiny. By the standards of the day and in light of the edicts and persecutions against Catholics by the English colonial powers, he received a good education by priest-masters in Ireland first and then later In Spain. It was this drive that saw him travel from his native country to the centre of the kingdom, London, where he got into trouble while still an adolescent for a document supporting a Catholic insurrection. He was never to lose this capacity for sedition.

Now with an existential need to leave England, he sailed out into the Channel where his ship was detained by pirates; sensibly he chose to join the pirates rather than return to England. There is evidence that he made such a good impression on his new colleagues that he was soon elevated within their hierarchy, indeed the fact that he accomplished this so quickly while so young and inexperienced again gives one the impression of a remarkable man.

Accusations presented by Lamport to King Philip IV concerning the viceroy the Marquess of Villene, 28 November 1641.
Image: Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico.

He finally abandoned the hard and dangerous trade of piracy and eventually arrived to Spain. There is no doubt he had obvious ability, a degree of charm and some ability in languages, and quickly entered the service of the great Catholic power of Europe. He was given important tasks by senior servants of the king and then even by the head minister. He also managed to procure a wife and with her have a daughter (eventually two of the innocent victims of this story who were to disappear into anonymity).

By this stage Lamport had shown he could perform his work well and without seeking the ear of the enemies of his masters. As such by the late 1630s he could be entrusted with certain very important tasks in that recently created part of the royal possessions, New Spain. He was sent over with the king's representative, the Viceroy, as well as the new bishop of Puebla, Don Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, a man who eventually would be a great critic of the whole corrupt set-up enjoyed by the king's secular and religious servants in the distant semi-autonomy of the new empire. But the bishop was fortunate: he was protected by his holy position and was later removed back to Spain rather than imprisoned.

The inquisition in New Spain was a state within a state, with a power-base to rival that of the Viceroy and his regime. It was entrusted with the protection of Catholicism in general in the region and the containment and, if deemed necessary, elimination of Protestants, Jews (either converts to Catholicism or still covertly practising Jews), and the less compliant Catholics. A central motivation to persecute these people, and a major element in deciding how then to deal with them, was their wealth and power. Many members of the inquisition recognised the liberty they had to pursue their enemies (and their money) under cover of their specific duties to defend the Catholic order and his majesty's peace and stability. Like the new bishop, Lamport saw how two-faced this was.

One could well imagine he was identified upon his arrival as a suspect foreigner with secret duties given by competitors of the Church's power in the new land. So he was marked from the start and his impressively inept

attempt to create rebellion among the natives, blacks and creoles in 1641-42 gave the inquisition the excuse to lock him up.

A small player with apparently some support from the authorities in the vice-regal palace and in Madrid, there was to be for years a limbo created between the limited interest of the politicians and the authority of the religious men who probably wondered for a long time how to deal with this Irishman without upsetting their secular lords. And so Lamport spent all those years in the spirit-destroying dark, smelly and monotonous life of this religious prison.

Sculpture of Lamport, located in the column of Mexico's Monument of Independence. Image: *El País*.

What can we make of his personality, the character that had to withstand 17 years in that filthy place with bad food, no diversion and constant spying by companions and listening priests? The work that had been entrusted to him indicates ability, reliability and concordance. The question as to whether he was successful in this work is obviously another matter. It might be said that men of his type were pawns in a great chess game, not to be acknowledged or denied help as the case may be. By modern standards William Lamport had a short life. But lives are measured too simply if we just focus on the number of months and years, and not take into account what was done and experienced – what was achieved and what suffered (in any case this length of life was surely reasonably long in the context of the average life-span in the seventeenth century).

But Lamport was very definitely not a piece of wood or marble. He had a tendency to fictionalise his life and family connections in a bid to be considered more important, perhaps as much to himself as to others, that goes very near to self-mythologising. It was a tendency that seemed to

increase as his desperation grew in prison – he even named himself a half-brother of the Spanish king. However, this is not what makes him important historically. His writings contain what are for the modern reader exemplary calls for equality among the races, restitution of lost land and privileges (of nobility and so on) to the natives, and support of the blacks, a group that at the time comprised a far higher percentage of the population than now is the case. And one can relate all this to his Irish background: the old Gaelic families dispossessed of their lands and social rank, without freedom to express themselves either in political or religious terms.

The Spanish recognised the value of welcoming the disconsolate Irish, giving them an education in their special colleges and employing them as soldiers, civil servants and spies. But this restless Irishman went far beyond that: he wrote a proclamation of independence with a clear emphasis on popular sovereignty and with a monarch with limited powers at its head – and from that comes the tale that he was the half-brother of the Spanish king and therefore an apt candidate for the job.

On the one hand one esteems him for recognising the injustices that he witnessed personally in Mexico City and, on the other side, there is no denying his stupidity in thinking that sufficient numbers of the population at that time not only wanted a country retaining its own political and economic control but were ready and willing to fight to achieve this. It is interesting to remember that the son of two Irish people, the viceroy Juan de O'Donojú y O'Ryan, signed the independence of Mexico 162 years after Lamport's death … although the rumour is that he was poisoned on Iturbide's orders very soon afterwards – like Lamport and the later soldiers of the Saint Patrick's Battalion, another Irish martyr to Mexican independence?

Juan O'Donojú y O'Ryan – The Key Man in Mexican Independence?

On the 20th August 1842 Doña María Josefa Sánchez-Barriga Blanco passed away as the result of a long period of extreme destitution during which she was often obliged to eat coffee. She was a Spanish citizen but the king of Spain would not allow her and her three sons to return there. She had been receiving a pension of 12,000 pesos for a number of years

from a grateful Mexican government but this had been discontinued. And why was she unable to go back to Spain and why had a pension been awarded to her? Her husband was the traitor (from the royalist Spanish point of view) and historical embarrassment (from the perspective of some powerful Mexicans) Don Juan O'Donojú y O'Ryan, the man who as a matter of conscience and goodwill helped create the independent country of Mexico in the late summer and autumn of 1821.

On his arrival to the port of Veracruz O'Donojú had seen with perfect clarity that there was no possibility whatsoever of Spain recovering her colony. Spanish authority now only operated in the port itself, Mexico City and Acapulco. There was even a lack of discipline among the Spanish themselves: the Viceroy (Juan Ruiz de Apodaca) had been deposed in a military action and the commander of Spanish forces, Pedro Francisco Novella, was trying to push back an irreversible tide. Appointed by the parliament (importantly not by King Ferdinand VII) with the title of "Jefe Politico Superior" and with the powers of the old viceroys, O'Donojú was aware of his political and moral capabilities. But the limits to his powers were just as apparent: within a few days of his arrival he knew all too well that there were insufficient finances and loyal troops to continue the fight against the insurgents.

Juan O'Donojú.
Image: Unidentified painter – Bicentenario México.

But his view of the situation went beyond that: as a life-long liberal and student of masonic thought particularly that of men from the Americas like Miguel Ramos Arizpe, veteran of the war against Napoleon's forces that had only been won less than ten years before, and son of two Irish people who had been forced from their native soil by anti-Catholic legislation – all this helps to explain what was essentially a *personal* decision. There is no denying the strength of his principles even from an early age: for example, he was against the appointment of the Anglo-Irish Arthur Wellesley as overall commander of forces fighting against the French in Iberia and demonstrated this by resigning as minister of war, and was also not in favour of the return of absolutist royal authority in 1814 for which his punishment was to spend four years in prison and suffer a degree of torture that according to contemporary accounts left him with scars on his body and hands.

By 1820 Ferdinando VII had succumbed to parliamentary dominance and the Spanish Constitution of 1812 had been re-established, and O'Donojú was back in favour. He was a lieutenant general in the army and captain general of Andalusia. He was now trusted to such an extent that the Cortes Generales appointed him to the critically important position of "Jefe Politico Superior" of New Spain – the 1812 Constitution had cancelled the title of Viceroy. The continuance of Spain as a genuine world power, the prestige of the country, New Spain as a pivotal source of its income – all these elements and others were in play. But during the voyage O'Donojú must have thought a great deal about the hopelessness of the project to retain New Spain and about the best way to hand over authority and retreat from the former colony with dignity, without bloodshed and with hope for future friendship between the two nations.

He arrived to Veracruz in late July 1821. Within a few days – on the 3rd August – he had written to the Cortes de Cadiz of the absence of resources and of strongholds to maintain Spanish colonial rule; on the same day, proceeding by his own authority and assessment, which by any measure was impressively quick and focused, he wrote a proclamation to the inhabitants of New Spain based on "la liberalidad de sus principios y la rectitud de sus intenciones" , in which he described his "deseo de alcanzar un acuerdo que fuera grato para los mexicanos". He spoke of resolving the situation – of *not* consolidating despotism, barbaric government and colonial dependence. Events were moving very rapidly indeed: in another

three weeks he travelled with a young Santa Anna to meet Iturbide in the town of Cordoba. The Plan of Iguala was accepted with one very interesting change: a Bourbon was to be offered the crown, which as a matter of pride and self-preservation they would inevitably refuse, and this would give the government in Mexico the authority to offer it to a non-noble, in other words Iturbide.

O'Donojú's acquiescence in this process showed him to be a practical man. He wrote in a letter to a general loyal to Ferdinand VII, José Dávila, still fighting in San Juan Ulúa, that he was

> Convencido de la justicia que asiste a toda sociedad para pronunciar su libertad y defenderla a par de la vida de sus individuos; de la inutilidad de cuantos esfuerzos se hagan, de cuantos diques se opongan para contener este sagrado torrente, una vez que haya emprendido su curso majestuoso y sublime.

O'Donojú, Iturbide and the head of royalist forces, Novella, had a meeting at a hacienda near Mexico City on the 13th September. A major achievement of this meeting was that by the 15th Novella had duly recognised O'Donojú as "jefe politico superior" and "capitán general" and therefore his superior. It was also here that O'Donojú again showed in a text for the Mexicans that optimism, very close to romantic idealism, which in private he seemed to have deep doubts about: "Amaneció el día tan suspirado por todos en que… los antiguos resentimientos desaparecieron; en que los principios luminosos del derecho de gentes brillaron con toda su claridad." He was after all a military man and a politician fully conscious of the monster that could be released if the right words were not applied at key moments, though at the same time one would like to think that these wishes were expressed with genuine interest in the welfare of the new country and its citizens. The evidence appears to show that this was indeed the case.

Meeting of O'Donojú, Novella and Iturbide, 13 September 1821.
Image: Unidentified Painter –. Museo Nacional de Historia, INAH México.

Why then, behind this very public show of confidence that all would be well once a treaty had been signed, was he worried about what was about to occur? There were obvious sources of preoccupation: lawlessness in much of the countryside, the usual rancours and power vacuums in a newly independent country, the need for all parties – from the Spanish back at home to the ambitious locals – to come together and agree on the processes of autonomy and system of rule.

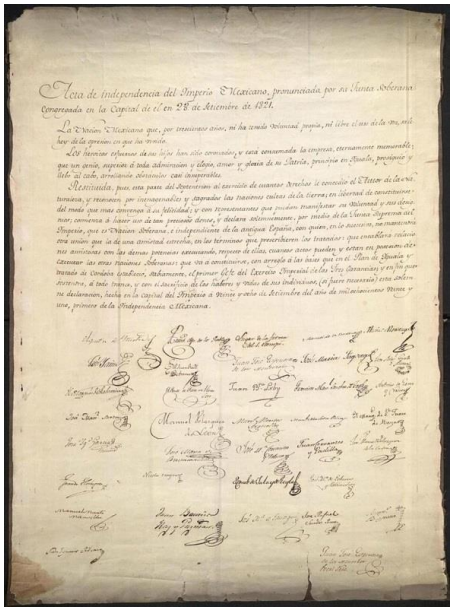
But he was also disturbed by what he was witnessing at first hand. O'Donojú was very conscious at the personal and political levels of the moral authority he possessed and which he had to protect and apply with wisdom concerning the well-being of Mexico in the long-term. The country was not going to get its independence from absolutist Spain only for this to be replaced by the imperial ambitions of Iturbide and his party. And this was precisely what he was seeing: when they should have been engaged in creating the best possible beginning for the new state, culminating in the signing of the Act of Independence on the 28th of September, Iturbide was also arguing about such matters as the possible number of nobles in a new regime effectively devoid of liberal ideas.

Emperor Agustín I.
Image: Josephus Arias Huarte (Mexican, active 19th century) - https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/40714.

Though O'Donojú expressed his desire to surrender his duties and live quietly In Mexico now that returning to Spain would almost certainly lead to his execution for treason, he was made a member of the "Suprema Junta Provisional Gubernativa" in special recognition of his continuing moral authority. But the fact that he did not arrive to that extraordinarily important meeting and therefore did not sign the act in person (along with four others) is clear proof that he did not wish to participate in the establishment of another despotic empire. It could be said that the limited interest shown by the new state in the obviously dire condition of his health in the days after this event was a result of his lack of co-operation in their new, terribly flawed project. O'Donojú died officially of "pulmonía y dolor pleurítico" ten days after Mexican independence was formally implemented – and, it must be remembered, a week after the Captaincy General of Guatemala (comprising Chiapas and all of Central America as far as Panama) had also joined the new country – and was interred in the Altar of Kings in Mexico City's cathedral.

Juan O'Donojú y O'Ryan was a man trusted by the liberal group that had forced Ferdinand VII in 1820 to reactivate the anti-absolutist Constitution of eight years before – he had won their faith through his actions against the French invaders, his seniority in the masonic hierarchy, his support of their campaign even when this meant imprisonment and torture, and his

obvious abilities in running military and civilian affairs in Andalusia. Upon arriving to the "province" of New Spain, he applied the same liberal principles as a matter of conscience and practical recognition of the state of affairs, and even went so far as to order the "virrey provisional" Francisco Novella to leave Mexico City with his eight thousand soldiers and return to Veracruz, all this to avoid yet more violence. The Act of Independence that was signed soon afterwards gave O'Donojú the title of "primer regente" with three other regents and Iturbide as president – as we have seen, matters such as this went against the ideals of O'Donojú. As it turned out, he was in good company in not signing the act: along with the four men who also didn't sign, the names of the three generals Guadalupe Victoria, Vicente Guerrero and Nicolás Bravo were not even included among the signatories apparently because it was known they had wanted a republic instead of an empire. It is an interesting fact that two marquises and two counts did actually put their names to the document.



Mexico's Acta de Independencia.
Image: Archivo General de la Nación, México.

The new imperial press itself made it known that they had lost what they called a virtuous colleague and noble friend, and General Guerrero spoke highly of O'Donojú when he heard of his passing:

> El fallecimiento del Excelentísimo señor don Juan O'Donojú… ha llenado de amargura a mi corazón. Ninguna expresión será bastante para manifestar mi

> sentimiento por la pérdida de este profundo político, que en tan corto tiempo dio a mi cara patria las pruebas menos equívocas de predilección.

It could be argued that, in taking actions that were effectively against the interests of his own country and indeed against his own personal survival, but were based on the realities of an untenable situation and an understanding of the rights and benefits of a subjugated people, O'Donojú had a remarkable impact on Mexico marked by an equally remarkable absence of self-interest. In the light of these facts, it can only be argued that the reason he is not better known and justly celebrated is due to his foreign birth, negative feelings against the old Spanish regime and its servants, and the unpopularity of the first Mexican empire and the people associated with it.

A Hiberno-Mexican Story: The Presence of the Irish in Mexico

Paper delivered to the Academia Nacional de Historia y Geografía – National Academy of History and Geography, Mexico City, 3 March 2011.

Dedicated to the Ilustrísima Orden de San Patricio.

Introduction

Modern-day Mexico is populated by a number of clearly recognisable ethnic groups, who are relatively large in number, generally marry among themselves and in some cases maintain a certain measure of distinctive culture and way of thinking that characterises their race. The Lebanese, Jewish and Chinese communities are good examples of this: relatively recent arrivals to these shores, their numbers and social solidarity keep them intact as an identifiable group. They have not disappeared in the same way that African slaves, mostly of course men, were rapidly diluted by intermarrying in the area of Veracruz in the eighteen century. By contrast, there are other groups who arrived to Mexico in far smaller numbers, in different parts of a vast and unpaved land, and at diverse times. Most of the Europeans who came to live here did so as individuals or in small contingents, retaining their surnames and possibly their physical characteristics, in a few cases creating their own social clubs and schools: the French, British, Germans, Swiss, and so on.

Even within this second category, the Irish never represented a very large minority. The Irish-Mexicans (or we can romantically call them the Hiberno-Mexicans) can be separated into four distinct groups:

1. Those in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries who were born in Ireland, went to Spain or perhaps the United States, and then ended up living in Mexico
2. Those born in Spain of Irish descent who later came to Mexico
3. From the nineteenth century onwards, those actually born in Ireland who as a matter of purpose or accident arrived to Mexico
4. Those actually born in Mexico and who are of Irish descent.

The Irish who emigrated to the United States of America, Canada and Australia in great numbers, and even those who chose to live in sizeable numbers in Argentina, did not often follow a similar triangulated route in order to get to their final destination.

Emigrants leaving Ireland.
Image: Engraving by Henry Doyle (1827–1893), from Mary Frances Cusack's *Illustrated History of Ireland*, 1868.

A brief word could be mentioned at this point concerning the amount of information available about the Irish in Mexico and the breadth of research that has been done on this subject. There is no large central source of information about Irish-Mexicans; indeed their numbers were never great and one consequence of the upheavals of the nineteenth century is that less information was actually recorded than in other countries. I will make a comparison which, to my mind, is quite revealing. With its headquarters in Switzerland, there exists a Society for Irish Latin America Studies which publishes a research journal and has a large quantity of ordered data, both biographical and numerical, about the Irish but principally as this relates to Argentina and its neighbouring countries. This is explained by the high numbers of emigrants to Argentina and the cyclical accumulation of facts and figures relating to them, particularly since the nineteenth century. In fact the breadth of information goes back to before this: for example, there exist details concerning the arrival in 1749 of the Lynch family to Buenos Aires, an action that would lead six generations later to the birth of the Irish Argentine Ernesto “Ché” Guevara Lynch and the overthrow of the Bautista regime in Cuba in the 1950s.

In general, the comparatively prosperous Argentina was a very attractive destination for the non-Spanish speaking European. The process to bring Irish people to Argentina typically involved intermediaries who often went to their own counties back home and enticed their countrymen with offers of land, employment and opportunity for the skilled lower middle class, and an escape for the poor land tenants from the perennial threat of famine and destitution. An agent who did exactly this was Edmund Casey who, along with a partner William R. Gilmour, began selling tracts of lands in Santa Fe to Irish farmers and others from 1879 onwards. A certain organisational structure was already in place: six years before, the St. Patrick's Society had already been established to promote emigration from Ireland. The emigration that did take place is a peculiarly unknown historical fact among Irishmen today: by 1841 there were 3,500 people of Irish birth living in the still-small city of Buenos Aires, mostly from the one county of Westmeath, and the number of Irish Argentines had risen to perhaps 110,000 by 1917.

Map of the 32 counties of Ireland

Early Irish

There exists a Toltec legend speaking of a man with fair skin and a blond beard who taught the Toltec people the virtues of brotherly charity,

acceptance of God's will and the secular benefits of improved methods of agriculture and use of metals. These elements have been teasingly related to the adventures of the Irish missionary, St. Brendan of Clonfert, an argument based on comments expressed in the "Novatio Brendani". The theory argues that Brendan was the representative of Quetzalcoyotl and the precursor of the equally white-skilled Hernan Cortés. (Of course, it should be said in passing that practically the only religious that has not been attributed to the well-travelled Brendan is a lunar mission.)

St. Brendan and the Whale.
Image: Unknown mediaeval scribe.
University of Applied Sciences, Augsburg, Germany.

Quite possibly the first Irishmen to step onto the continent of America were members of Christopher Columbus's crew, perhaps recruits from his visit to the west of Ireland in 1477. There is certainly evidence of an Irishman called John Martin who was marooned on the Mexican coast with one hundred others by the privateer John Hawkins in 1568 because Hawkins had no room for them in his surviving vessels; he was executed seven years later.

During the vice-royalty of New Spain, most Irishmen who came to the colony were either priests, soldiers or colonial servants: as such, they were typically graduates of the clerical institutes of Spain or Rome, members of the military such as the Hibernia Regiment stationed in Mexico from 1768 to 1771, or former students of the Real Colegio de Nobles Irlandeses (established 1593).

Regiment of Hibernia in Spanish Service – Uniform and Flag (c. 1750).
Image: A. Valdés Sánchez - Brown University Library, Madrid.

Two individuals are typical of these men. The first, "El Capitán Colorado", Hugo O'Conor, was the first Commandant Inspector of the Interior Province from 1771 and later governor of the Yucatán, and is remembered today for his military reforms and two general campaigns against the stubbornly recalcitrant Apaches – a pragmatist, he was strongly in favour of employing Indian allies to fight along with the Spanish. The second was the son of immigrants from the south of Ireland, Juan O'Donojú, the new viceroy in 1821 who managed in the few months of life that Mexico allowed him to sign the Treaty of Cordoba establishing Mexican independence.

Hugo O'Conor or Hugo Oconór.
Statute in front of Manning House in Tucson, AZ.
Photo © 2012 Chuck Nugent.

Juan O'Donojú y O'Ryan – Reenactment of agreement to end the war of independence in 1821.
Image: Huatusco en Línea.

The honour of being the only Irishman represented on the "Monumento a la Independencia" does not belong to him but rather to William Lamport, author of the first declaration of independence (which notably supported such measures as racial equality, land reform and a democratically elected monarchy, advanced ideas for the early seventeenth century) and apparently the model for Johnston McCulley's novel about the womanising but socially responsible Zorro. This interest in the well-being of the indigenous and the suppressed is a recurring them in the history of the Irish in Mexico: one instance is the Franciscan Juan Augustín Morfí, chaplain of expeditions to the northern territories, who had written within fifteen years of his arrival to Mexico an especially powerful investigation of the native people, *Viaje de Indios y Diario del Nuevo México*. Something of the same empathetic pressure shown previous generations of Irishmen in New Spain formed part of the motivation among certain soldiers of the U.S. interventionist forces of 1846 and 1847 to change sides.

The Irish in Texas and northern Mexico

The regions of Spanish North America where Irish people had settled in relatively large numbers were the Louisiana Territory (passed from French to Spanish control in 1762 and governed for a short period by the Irish-born Field Marshall Alexandro O'Reilly) and the area now covered by the modern state of Texas. There was some degree of ambivalence among the Irish in terms of their loyalty to their political masters, whether they were the Spanish or later the Mexicans. But it is noteworthy that upon completion of the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 by the United States and the creation of the new state of Coahuila and Texas in 1824, immigration by Irish Catholics into Texas was actively encouraged.

Their cooperation in doing this was assisted by the pressure of Protestant newcomers to this area, animated by racial and sectarian nativist ideas. A good example of what happened during this period involves the Irish settlers who began arriving to the Texan towns of Refugio in 1829 and San Patricio in 1831. Their journey from Ireland to these destinations was a typical story of disease and shipwreck. A cholera epidemic killed two hundred of them while they were quarantined off New Orleans. One of their consolations was the aid they received from Mexican people and officials.

The Irish *empresarios* or land agents offered each family one "labor" (177 acres) of land if they used it for cultivation but a far larger area of one "sitio" (4,428 acres) if they raised livestock. A further enticement of

an additional quarter of the total was offered if they married a Mexican national. The *empresario* himself was to receive five "sitios" (c. 22,000 acres) plus five "labores" for each one hundred families he brought. The settlements themselves turned out to be two of the very few agreements that were actually successful at this time in Texas. The son of the former viceroy of Peru, Bernardo O'Higgins, talked from 1823 to 1830 of the importance of a colonisation comprising such industrious and brave people [the Irish]" but, as in Chile, his plans came to nothing.

Louisiana Territory (in dark green)

There are reports that, during this period directly after the independence of Mexico in 1821, there was antagonism between some Irish Catholics and new settlers who were Protestant and in favour of the United States. The loyalties of the Irish were finally revealed in the 1835 Texan War. Two of the four *empresarios* favoured secession, while another, Dr. John Hewetson, remained loyal to the government of Santa Ana, abandoned his properties and went to live in Matamoros (although reputedly he still died a wealthy man). This forced exit or voluntary departure of Irish people loyal to the Mexican republic partly explains the large quantity of Irish surnames – Byrne, Walsh, Foley, Hayes and O'Leary – still found in states like Chihuahua, Nuevo León and Durango.

As was said earlier, quite often the Irish quite often found themselves by the machinations of historical accident in locations they had not originally intend to inhabit. A last chapter in this series of projects by Irish *empresarios* occurred when a plan was submitted by Fr. Eugene McNamara to settle 10,000 Irish people in northern California. The proposal was again partly based on the argument that they would be a bulwark against the encroaching Americans and become active players in the economic development of the region, but the Treaty of Hidalgo ending the Mexican-American War in 1849 made this plan irrelevant – Mexico had forfeited California.

Territorial evolution of Mexico

The San Patricios

As a way of introducing the topic of the well-known St. Patrick's Battalion, I would like to mention some of the military exploits of the Irish in Latin America. The poorer people of that island, and even the sons of the wealthier classes, formed a major part of the British Army for generations and also represented a large percentage of the forces of certain other countries: perhaps as many as a half of General Washington's soldiers fighting against English colonial forces in the 1770s were Irish-born or of Irish descent. Soldiery was a source of employment and was motivated by such basic sentiments as patriotism, empathy for the underdog and financial reward. Irishmen participated in the wars of independence in the 1810s and 1820s. In 1814 the navy of Argentina was commanded by William Brown and that of Uruguay by Peter Campbell. Two thousand soldiers were recruited by John Devereux to fight in Bolivar's army and the descendants of those who stayed today live in Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador. Again in 1827, the imperial Brazilian Army, through the good works of Col. William Cotter, recruited 2,500 men and their families for their war against Argentina. As always, sickness and mutiny decimated their numbers more than the fighting itself, but in this case it is interesting to note that many – perhaps most – of the survivors chose either to return to Ireland or to leave for Canada and, ironically, their former adversary Argentina. On an admittedly small scale, a military diaspora had occurred.

Some of the background to what in the United States is called the "Mexican-American War" and in Mexico is titled the "War of Intervention" has already been discussed in previous sections of this paper. The Mexicans were certainly aware that their northern possessions, the scene of much bloodshed against native peoples and investment of treasury, were under-populated yet obviously very

attractive to an admittedly more entrepreneurial nation which clearly recognised the advantages of possessing the ports of San Francisco and San Diego, the natural resources of Nevada, a trade route through New Mexico and the vast farming lands in between. As with the intervention of the British, Spanish and French in the 1860s, the formal reason given for hostilities was the non-payment of outstanding loans and indemnities. In light of this grievous omission on the part of Mexicans, the offer of US$5 million for New Mexico and US$25 million for California probably appeared quite munificent; after all the imperial French had previously seen common-sense and sold the equally remote and transparently underdeveloped Louisiana Territory, as the Russians would late do with Alaska. But the Mexicans were proud that their recently independent country extended deep into North America, that it contained tremendous possibilities that would be plundered in good time. In any case, that stubborn survivor of his own shortcomings, Santa Ana, was back in the presidential palace.

All of this acts as an introduction to the famous band of soldiers, the so-called San Patricios, whose ranks – contrary to the belief of many – were never more than 60% Irish but whose ethos and passionate sense of the little man against the bully were characteristically Irish. The soldiers comprised men born in at least seven different European countries excluding Ireland, plus Canadians, Mexicans, Americans and even escaped slaves. With very few actual US citizens, it was a small United Nations with belligerent Catholic sensitivities. Though its nominal commander was Colonel Francisco Moreno, its most famous soldier was the lead of its first company, Brevet Major John Riley.

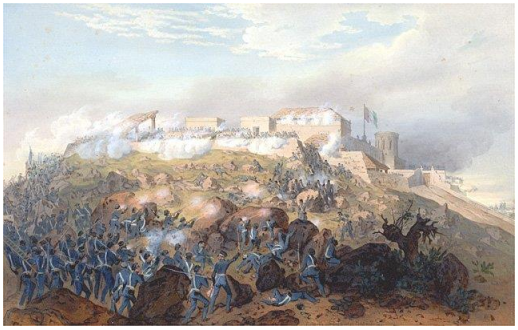
The practice of recruiting foreigners into the Mexican Army was already well established: by the opening of hostilities in 1846, sixteen foreigners had already reached the rank of general in the Mexican armed forces. Several Irish-Mexicans counted among the many Irishmen who eventually would fight in the battalion. There were also young men born in Ireland who were recruited in the southern United States. One can well imagine that their initial entry into the US Army was governed more by the need for income and adventure than for a deep sense of loyalty to the country they hardly knew whose racism against them reminded them of their treatment back home as the inferior race of the British Isles. One should however keep in mind that they did not simply *desert* the US Army as so many others did; they actually went further, ignoring the temptation to disappear into the empty vastness of the western United States, and *defected* to the Mexican forces.

In some cases, the mercenary mentality certainly did operate: after all the Mexicans were offering citizenship, higher wages than the US Army and a minimum of 1.3 square kilometres of land to each new recruit, all succinctly explained in leaflets in English, German and French. If a man ignored the quite obvious inevitability of US victory and the concurrent ire of military justice even for non-citizens in its army, then this incentive was important. But one should also recall that the human being is sensitive to what he witnesses, especially if he can put himself in the place of the victim. This sympathy was certainly identified as a motivation to defect by Catholics: as Jack Bauer expresses it, "On reaching Mexico they discovered they had been hired by heretics to slaughter brethren of their own church." The leaflets encouraged this sympathy and the "impulsive and emotional" decision was made by a tiny minority of Irish soldiers in the US Army to change sides. Though in line for a lieutenants' commission, John Riley himself lasted only seven months in the US Army before he was motivated to pass to the Mexican side, before war was even declared but at a point at which hostilities would have appeared inevitable.

Battle of Churubusco, Mexico City.
Image: Painting by Carl Nebel. Published in the 1851 book
The War between the United States and Mexico, Illustrated.

The newly configured St. Patrick's Battalion participated in five major engagements against the Americans. Beginning as a artillery force at the Battle of Monterrey in September 1846, they were equipped with the heaviest guns that could be mustered, plus two six-pounders they captured at the Battle of Buena Vista or Angostura in February 1847. They were the main response on the Mexican side to US horse soldiery. However, though they numbered among their ranks men who had served in the armies of other countries, their weakness lay in the lack of heavy guns and the propensity of the poorly trained and officered Mexican militia to engage the enemy with equal tenacity and skill. As highly capable deserters to the opposing army, their fate if captured would have

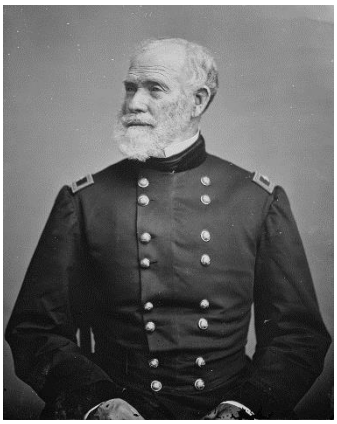
been very clear. There exist records of their stubbornness as fighting men that impressed both Gen. Francisco Mejía and his US counterpart Gen. Winfield Scott, but it was a level of belligerence that would hardly secure them mercy if and when they were finally captured.



US assault at Chapultepec Castle.
Image: Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot/Carl Nebel. Published in
The War Between the United States and Mexico, Illustrated, 1851.

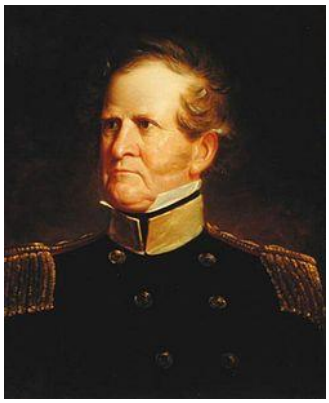
Eventually at the Battle of Mexico City, with at least 35 of their companions already killed, about half of the survivors were captured and perhaps another 85 retreated with the Mexican forces. Courts martial quickly followed, their haste to set an example and for vengeance clearly indicated by the absence of both representation of legal counsel and written records. It is an interesting fact that one of the 96% of Irish soldiers in the US Army who did not desert, the Irish-born Col. Bennet Riley, presided over the court martial in San Angel. Of those captured, two escaped execution, one because of "improper enlistment" in the Mexican Army and the other due to insanity; later, after pressure from eminent people such as the Archbishop of Mexico City and the British minister, another nine were pardoned due to their youth and another owing to drink.

An interesting quirk of military law dictated that, since they had deserted *before* the war began, John Riley and several others received a sentence of whipping administered by Mexican muleteers (who were notably enjoined to make their best efforts in this task), branding with a "D" on the cheek and imprisonment. As for the others, their sentence was death by hanging. The powerful message of keeping the condemned with nooses around their necks for four-and-a-half hours at an execution presided over by a man with a reputation for rape and the murder of a slave girl, is well known. The riposte to this insult – the cheering of the Mexican flag by the men about to die – is also equally well known.



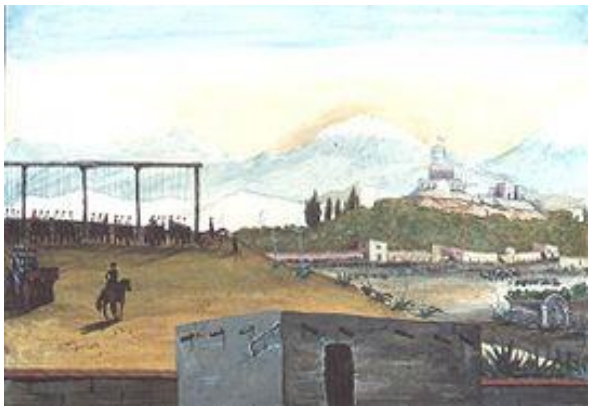
William S. Harney (1860). Image: Mathew Benjamin Brady - U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Bennet C. Riley. This image downloaded from http://freenet.buffalo.edu/bah/a/del/641/hist/source/2.html



Winfield Scott. Image: 1835 portrait by George Catlin.

There are some revealing facts about the war as they relate to the San Patricios. It is quite plain that they were made scapegoats in a war that often lacked basic military discipline and solidarity: the desertion rate in this war was twice as high as that of the war in Vietnam, but desertion specifically by Irish soldiers was in fact much lower than the overall percentage. However, the San Patricios were the only deserters executed as a group and the perception was created among certain elements of the army that the loyalty of Irish troops was not to be relied on. One could argue that the fact that they were deemed so successful as a fighting unit and such a threat if allowed to survive is a compliment to them. Interestingly, the battalion was revived by March 1848 but their level of indiscipline, as much as budget cuts, obliged President José Joaquín de Herrera to dissolve the group later in the same year.



Hanging of captured members of the St. Patrick's Battalion,
within sight of Chapultepec Castle.
Image: Painting by Samuel Chamberlain, c. 1867.

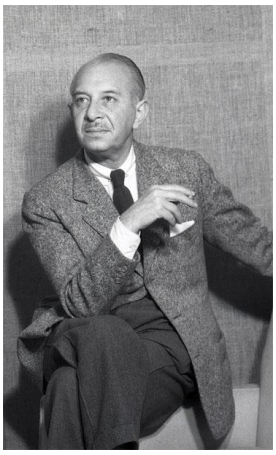
Their brief existence, their relative success in battle and their final sacrifice were hardly noticed in Ireland. At the time the country was experiencing the Great Famine which led to of hundreds of thousands of deaths and a larger number emigrating. The scale of domestic misery obliterated all possible interest in the execution of a few dozen emigrants in a distant and unfamiliar land. Mexico I think still remembers them and is grateful; some survivors, disallowed from entering the US, appear to have taken up their land grants, while perhaps twenty more had returned to Ireland by the end of 1851.

Plaque listing members of the St. Patrick's Battalion, San Angel, Mexico City.

The Later Irish and Conclusions

Since that turbulent epoch in Mexico's history, the arrival of Irish people and the lives of their descendants have been much more pacific. But there was still some opportunity for an Iris-Mexican to cause political mischief in Mexico. In his capacity as legal advisor to the state of Yucatán, Justo Sierra O'Reilly declared the state independent from Mexico. His now perhaps more famous son, Justo Sierra Méndez, was an inspiration to the ideologies behind the Mexican revolution and the intellectual father of the UNAM. In the tranquil field of commerce, Eustace Barron along with his Scottish partner created the foremost British merchant house in the nineteenth century. The grandson of the first British consul (1823) to Mexico, Cecil Crawford O'Gorman, arrived to Mexico in 1895 and one of his sons, Juan, became a painter of the quality and innovation of Orozco, Rivera, Tamayo and another Irish-Mexican, Pablo O'Higgins; while another son, Edmondo, the philosopher- historian, became a founder of post-colonial research in Latin America.

Justo Sierra O'Reilly.
Image: "Biografia de Justo Sierra O'Reilly", in *La Enciclopedia Biográfica en Línea*, Barcelona, España.
https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/s/sierra_o_reilly.htm



Edmondo O'Gorman.
Image: Elisa Vargaslugo, Archivo Fotográfico IIE-UNAM.

Finally, the conclusion I wish to present deals with the reasons why Irish people did not come here. A series of eminently practical considerations explains the lack of a large influx. One reason has to do with the cost of the trip: with little or no direct transport to this country, the price of travelling here from Ireland would have been a pivotal drawback particularly in the context of more familiar and trusted destinations. There are stories of people boarding ship only to Canada and then taking the train to the US as this was cheaper than a single journey to New York. The outlay required became extremely important during and after the 1840s, once the Great Famine effectively performed its task of ethnic cleansing of the poorest peasants. What Mexico offered during the nineteenth century was a lot of land whereas the U.S., by contrast, offered both land *and* employment. Another issue involved the absence of a critical mass of compatriots encouraging those at home to follow them and guiding them once they arrived.

There was also a problem of compatibilities: the language that was spoken here was not English; the cultural, legal and indeed social character of the country was not one they would have been at home with, though a few made the necessary effort and grew to love the general Mexican make-up. There was in addition the perception, whether based on reality or not, that the country practiced an ethic and performed its politics in an alien and unstable way. Corruption and not adhering to the rule of law are after all a great deterrence even to the most desperate emigrant. But simply, the fact that the United Kingdom, the US and

Canada, Australia, New Zealand and even Argentina were all options on the menu of destinations meant that Mexico was rarely first choice. And then, if course, even if they came here, there was every possibility that sooner or later Irish immigrants would leave anyway on finding the required adjustment too difficult.

In more recent times, those who came typically did do because they were invited to take a position here or a business opportunity was identified and acted upon. As we saw earlier, their path to Mexico could have been a contorted one. The Murray family of actors arrived from Northern Ireland via Argentina to Mexico, the Milmos passed from Sligo to the US and then here, the O'Farrills started in county Longford and came here after sojourns in Spain and elsewhere. They are relatively new arrivals, are well-known because of their success in the field of media, and one senses they feel at home here.

Why would an Irish person feel this way about Mexico? Let me posit a theory. Ireland is a country that often suffers from a well-concealed lack of self-esteem, a debilitating assessment of itself that is fortified by its habit of comparing itself to its larger neighbouring country, in this case the Great Britain. "Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de Inglaterra" as a phrase could capture this mentality. Mexico has a similar disposition. Ireland is a country in Europe but does not entirely feel itself European. Its people are first loyal to their county, city or region; then they identify themselves with the country itself; then perhaps they feel themselves part of the British Isles and, after that, of the Anglo-American or English-speaking world. Somewhere within this mix, or perhaps right at the end, they are Europeans. In an identical way, according to the map Mexico is part of North America but many of its people don't genuinely feel themselves to be North Americans. If the two peoples are similar in something, it is perhaps this, among others. Although one would like to think that this habit of mind is growing weaker and the major compatible elements has more to do with personality and human sensibilities.

Ruth Troeller: Experiences in the Second World War with the Portuguese “life-line” and André Malraux

Excerpt from her biography written by Stephen Murray Kiernan, a work undertaken at the request of the University of Stanford, California.

Dr. Ruth Troeller lived in Roma Norte until her death in March 2020 at the age of 101. With her husband, the famous documentary-maker Gordian Troeller, she spent most of the Second World War living in neutral Lisbon helping to put refugees on the convoys travelling to the United Kingdom. A friend of André Malraux and a student of Sartre, she later settled in England to work at the University of London but continued to travel and work tirelessly over many years, among other achievements playing a key part in the development of the oil industry in Venezuela in the 1970s. She has lived in Mexico City for over thirty years, teaching at the United States International University and her own institute. Her multi-volume collection of diaries, detailing her experiences but especially her thoughts, is now housed at Stanford University. In this excerpt of her biography, written with Stephen Murray Kiernan, she recalls her experiences during the 1939-45 War …

Ruth signing one of her books, at her home in Mexico City.
Image: Stephen Murray Kiernan.

By the beginning of 1938 I was back home in Luxembourg ... And nobody did anything and this was strange and tense because the month of August 1939 had come and Luxembourg was very much threatened by the imminent war. And to make matters more complex, my parents decided not to agree with my friendship, or more than friendship, with

Gordian. I was not allowed to see him. Of course I still saw him daily when I went out but it was a terrible strain. The strain of the war to come, of my parents not really doing anything, my not really doing anything; my brothers' not doing anything – all of us just waiting for the war. The important thing was every week to renew the "iron ration", in other words the reserve of water and rice and other essentials in case there were to be a conflict. And by these means we would have enough food at least for two weeks. And even then the stockpile had to be renewed all the time so it would not become stale, and we acquired the habit of looking for apples and potatoes that had started to rot and, if not removed, would infect the others.

… And like that we lived for about eighteen months, from the beginning of 1938 until the second of September, 1939. Then we had war. But before that there was little or nothing of actual war, merely the perennial danger of it. Finland was occupied but nobody in Luxembourg cared about Finland. Then Poland was cut into two according to the accords of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Agreement, one half taken by the Soviet Union, the other by Germany.

Ruth with her husband, the great documentary-maker Gordian Troeller, probably in Portugal in the early 1940s.
Image: Troeller family archive.

War was declared the moment the Germans walked into Poland on the second of September because Chamberlain had told Hitler that if he entered Poland that this meant in effect a declaration of hostilities. And so it was. But again nothing happened. And we became staler and staler. The whole town of Luxembourg was waiting, almost whispering "Come on, start!" because it was almost *insupportable*. And we had to stand it, this waiting. You could not easily get out of Luxembourg. You could go to Belgium but to get into France was not anything like as easy.

Then suddenly certain serious actions were taken. My brother had a girlfriend, about whom my parents pretended not to know, a girl called Edmée. She was in direct contact with the family of the Grand Duke. And on the night of the 10th of May 1940 our telephone rang at about three o'clock. And it was Edmée who said very drily to me that the Grand Duchess and some of her family had just left by plane to London and that the German paratroopers were dropping all over Luxembourg. My brother was very quick; he had already prepared a kind of escape plan. So he took it and he said "Bye, people!", jumped on his bicycle and left.

It was now time for me to take action as well. I took the telephone and rang Gordian. I said, "How long will it take you to be here with the bicycle?" He said, "Well, about twenty minutes." And I stood in front of my parents and I told them, "I am sorry. God bless you. But I am leaving with the person I have chosen." And my parents just could not say anything. They blessed me and I went down to where Gordian was waiting. Men's bicycles have a crossbar and he pedalled with me on this crossbar for about twenty kilometres all the way to Eschen, where there is a direct frontier crossing with France.

And when we came to the frontier, there was a young man, a German as it turned out, standing there with his parachute still literally entangled in his machinegun. Gordian had taken the bicycle on his shoulder and he signalled towards the west, "Our farm is over there. Can we just get there?" With that the young German said, "Of course." And over there was France, which he did not know. He was a very nice young man and he did not have an idea; he had just been parachuted into our little country. He still had the accoutrements of the parachute all around him, entangled in his machinegun.

Ruth just after the end of hostilities in Europe, c. June 1945. Troeller archive.

So we went to France. But there is nothing in that little part of France, so we could not stay there … the hill going up, with lots of grass and trees, and we got ourselves through this barren land. Gordian took his handkerchief out of his pocket and we saw some French soldiers up ahead of us. It was only two or three hundred meters but there was no other way. There was just the grass with very little cover. It took us two hours to get there. The French soldiers did not like that and they were shooting over our heads. On the theme of fear: I remember as a child the fear I had of fear itself, something I think I finally lost when Gordian and I progressed for two hours those three hundred metres to cross the firing line from Luxemburg to France.

For me this loss was to create a deeper relationship with the deity or rather a more subtle one in which God does not punish with a thunderbolt but punished with a fear of punishment – effectively the difference between violence and the threat of violence. But we got there, hiding behind the trees. As it turned out they were very nice, these French soldiers. "Ah! Finally it has started!" "You got here!" And they were very jolly though they certainly were not so jolly the next day. And they said, "The barracks are over there, but you'll have to keep your head down to get there." We managed to do this. There were more big barracks and lots of soldiers and they said again with unexpected gaiety, "Oh, hi, Luxembourgers!"

So we stayed there. I had hardly anything with me, just a very nice pink knitted dress on. In the evening (something I'll never forget), I went to wash my underwear in cold water. There was a soldier standing next to me and he said, "You obviously have never washed your own clothes before." And I told him it was the first time. And he said, "Your fingers are nearly bleeding already with this little thing. Come on, give me this stuff! I know how to wash clothes." It was something that made a deep impression: this big soldier washing my underwear. And then, suddenly, in the middle of our chat, an alarm sounded and an explosion was heard at some distance. And I said, "Oh! Why is there this alarm? Whatever was hit is very far away." And the soldier said to me, "You run *now*, you two. Because this one was too far, the next one will be too near. And the third one will strike the barrack building. So you get out now." And I just grabbed my wet underwear and we left walking into France.

… Our plan at the time was to continue to Portugal and somehow make our way to Great Britain to join the Free French force. It then took us

about two months to get over the frontier to Spain … When we finally made it into Spain we were immediately put into prison. And the jail itself was a very peculiar place for me: I was put in with some twenty prostitutes. But that turned out to be a good thing because the prostitutes were from the little village and their families brought them food because the prison authorities did not give meals. I met Gordian about every four hours when we went to the loo. Eventually we were sent back to the French side of the border. We then spent some time walking through the south of France attempting to find a way to get over to Spain and from there, hopefully, to Portugal. It was during this period that we came to Marcel, a big and very ugly town, and there we suddenly had to settle as finally we had no money to buy food. People might give you something to eat – people who had something to eat, they shared it.

… We tried again and finally we succeeded in going over the frontier. And there we were arrested again. This time we stayed in the prison for a little less than two weeks, and again the prostitutes looked after me. To cap it all I remember Gordian got a bad infection in his mouth. One day quite out of the blue they gave us some clothes; quite normal clothes but a godsend because by then we looked absolutely terrible. When we were released we went to a train station. And a man, a Spaniard with civilian clothes, ordered us onto the train; and the train then went from the frontier first to Madrid and from Madrid to the Portuguese border. The man was eating sandwiches all the way; the trip took two days, during which we had nothing to eat, just staring at his sandwiches. He did not say a word to us; he was some sort of policeman but without a uniform but wearing what I can only describe as a low bureaucratic suit.

We arrived at the Portuguese frontier, absolutely famished and exhausted, and our well-fed policeman said “Good bye!” and then we went to Portugal. We were without any entry papers – no visa, nothing – and had no Portuguese. We both had good Spanish and Italian, so we could say something. But Portuguese – no idea! Luckily there are always kind people and some people gave us something to eat. I don't recall now how we got from the frontier to Lisbon. But in Lisbon then there were lots of refugees from France and Belgium, and even from Luxembourg …

Then at last we went into the house and a little later a very well-behaved gentleman came who asked us if we wished to go to Coimbra almost in the centre of the country. I had no idea where that place was but I thought that it’d be better to accept straight away. He gave me a ticket and when I

asked him for something to eat before our departure, he replied that we'd get food in Coimbra. I thought it was next door! It turned out to be a four-hour train journey. A very curious physical impediment had coincided with our arrival to Lisbon: my legs had partially stopped functioning as a result of some sort of psychosomatic reaction to our good fortune in making it to the safety of Portugal.

We stayed briefly in Coimbra and were then sent along with other refugees to a fishing village. There the fishermen were very poor and interestingly they were Quakers. The Quakers had a fantastic house near the beach and finding that all of us were more or less well-educated people, they put us with these fishing people and invited us to come every day to their house and eat with them, which we did. It was here that Gordian heard that an English journalist by the name of Sefton Delmer was in Lisbon and writing articles about the situation in Portugal. And so we went to a very elegant hotel in Lisbon to speak to this reporter. We knocked on his bedroom door and a deep male voice could be heard inviting us to enter. In the best gentlemanly tradition my husband invited me to enter first, whereupon I was confronted by a tall, fat and naked man gingerly examining the thick carpet with his foot looking for a stud for his shirt collar.

Ruth at her weekend home in Cuernavaca, Mexico, probably in the 1980s.
Image: Troeller family archive.

The English correspondent was in many ways (together with many others of course) a very important influence on our lives. He looked at Gordian and said, "You can write, can't you?" And Gordian said, "Of course, but…" "Of course you can write," said the man, "and you are going to write for me because I am leaving tomorrow for England." That was the beginning of our writing career in Portugal and it would carry on for the four years we were there. Gordian became the correspondent in Portugal

for the *Daily Express*. Delmer very quickly sent us money. I couldn't write because my English was very bad while Gordian's English was better. However, for the first time in many months we became comfortable: we bought clothes, we took an apartment, and later on we had an even more beautiful apartment.

A short time after this we met a woman called Suzanne Chantal. She was a typical good-mannered though not high-class Frenchwoman. Very intelligent but very differently intelligent from us. She had been writing for newspapers; she had been with cinema people. She was to give me enough information about Portugal – its history and art – that I became quite a connoisseur of my new home, though never eventually a specialist or a lover of the country. She later came to write two books about us, *Dieu Ne Dort Pas* and *La Chaine y la Trame*. In her work I am there as a potentiality, a young elegant debutante with great dreams and hostess of beautiful dinners, but one who also towards the end starts on the road of proper independence…

In my life, Suzanne would become very important because she taught me to read novels – great, important novels. She was the first person who pronounced the name André Malraux to me. André Malraux was the father of two boys and the mother was Suzanne's best friend, Josette Clotis (I occasionally got the impression that she loved Josette more than her own José). She encouraged me to read Malraux's books which afterwards had a very great importance in my life. She made me read modern French literature, which was already existentialist in style and emphasis. And I could not believe it: I had been reading all the classics from Russia, from England, from everywhere. But I hadn't read modern novels. This new commitment occupied my life completely for almost two years.

Gordian was writing and writing, and getting more and more involved with the refugees who came to Portugal, and also with the people who wanted to be shipped on to England in order to serve in the British Army or more often the Free French Army. After about a year and a half or two years we both became involved with the Dutch Embassy because the custom was that the Luxembourgian representative was Belgium and, if there was no Belgian representation, the responsible diplomat was then the Dutch representative. This vital activity became dominant and from that moment onwards we did not write many articles any more. Gordian and myself did something which became very important and that is we established a life-line from Luxembourg to Portugal. That meant that a

lot of volunteers parachuted into France – so-called "Vichy France" – to places where you could take people from one jail to another.

Gordian established this life-line with the help of the Dutch because Luxembourg was not merely occupied but had been annexed, in a similar way to Austria, which meant that it was now a part of Germany. The consequence of this was that our young boys were supposed to go into the German army and fight against the Russians. So the life-line became a reality. Gordian's idea was absolutely sensational: to move people from prison to prison. In every prison in Spain there was somebody who could be bribed. So our people would go with prison-wagons from jail to jail until they reached Portugal. Personally the good thing about the whole affair was that my two brothers also arrived like that. They came from France to Portugal, where they were arrested and had to spend three weeks or so in prison. And then we got them out; Henri and Walter were to live outside Lisbon in Ericeira… This entire organisation was geared to placing the same young men on a British convoy that passed twice a month close to Portuguese territorial waters. In this way we got people from Luxembourg to Portugal and then, if they wanted to, they were taken on a small fishing boat to the convoy. And then they left for De Gaulle's Free French Army or the British Army.

We had one very nasty experience that affected me terribly. One young man employed at the Dutch embassy, with whom we were quite friendly, turned out to be a traitor. Some of the boats transporting the soldiers to the convoy exploded. Exposed by a sailor friend, the man was arrested and sent to England as a prisoner and, I heard later, was subsequently executed. It's not because I was especially friendly with him; I wasn't, I knew him, but the very idea that somebody who looks like a nice person could be a traitor to his own country and wilfully kill decent men like that really got me down terribly. It has made me think very seriously about the ethics of people executing another human being, if there really exist circumstances in which a man had judicially the right to take the life of another man.

… Suzanne had been talking to me very much about André Malraux, I listened to Suzanne reading the letters she got from Malraux's partner Josette, and I read all his books. Philosophically I was beginning to understand the origins and developments of existentialism and its importance to contemporary thinking. Indeed, Kierkegaard, Jaspers and others were people who were mentioned to me and whom I read in the great deal of free time I had in those few years in Portugal. The whole

question of existence preceding essence was already present in mind as I had become interested in the "soul", not the religious concept of it but the immutable *me* that nobody could take away from me, that would entirely depend on my beliefs and acceptance and goodwill, and mainly on my acts and refusals to act.

In the meantime, when Paris was liberated, Suzanne asked if André wanted to see us and even asked me to take many things for them, like coffee. Sadly Josette was killed shortly afterwards when she slipped boarding a train. Suzanne had a maid, a Belgian woman, who was married to a Frenchman and together they had a little restaurant. And she got in touch with these people and they received us. *Liberatión* had already taken place and it was now February 1945. We arrived by train with all our luggage and with the things to feed and clothe people: coffee, a fur coat, shoes, Portuguese knickknacks no-one really wanted, even jewellery. I knew also by then that my parents were in Paris; they had spent most of the war years looking after an unofficial old-age home in southern France and moved the aged inhabitants from place to place when necessary. They had lost everything back in Luxemburg, especially when in late 1944 the Germans counter-attacked the Allied push in the Low Countries and Luxemburg was destroyed in the fighting. The boys, my brothers, had stayed in Portugal, but all four were to be reunited and would soon travel to the United States. We ourselves were immediately instructed which places to go to. We stayed in a very small apartment of Raymond and Jeanne, the maid and her husband; they slept in the restaurant. And we began to frequent places where the writers congregated, Sartre and others.

And so it happened that one evening, about a week after we arrived, I was in one of the restaurants in St. Germain des Prés in a type of trembling anticipation before meeting this great writer, when a very tall officer came in. I was waiting for Gordian. Both intellectually and spiritually I had been preparing for some time to meet this man of great courage and high convictions. And I looked at that officer and I said, "Oh, André? I'm Ruth." And he said, "Of course you are Ruth! I did not know how to find you." Then he asked, "Where is Gordian?" "Oh, he will be coming any second," I replied. That started a fantastic friendship. He said, "Where are you sleeping?" And I said, "In Jeanne and Raymond's tiny apartment." It was really only one room and I don't think any kitchen, and with one very big bed. And it was terribly cold.

And he said, “I don’t have anywhere to sleep. I’m going to sleep in your place.” And so we left together.

But he did have a man, a driver, as he was working at the Ministry for Information. We drove to the maid’s studio. There was a big mattress on the bed, so we put this on the floor, and between the mattress and the bed you could not even put a foot, the floor-space was that limited. And like that we lived for about two or three weeks with André. He talked seriously to me at night and, in some ways, the path of my life was decided through those conversations. He saw in me what I wished so much to become and even spoke to my husband about my worth. During the day he was at work somewhere and in the evening we ate together. And then when it was very cold we went down to the *métro* because it was warm down there. So started a deep friendship that was to last until 1968 when my husband and I took exception to some of the comments and decisions that Malraux now took as De Gaulle’s minister of culture.

Ruth with the author in 2017. She had just received the first copy of a book containing a small selection from her more than seventy volumes of diaries. These are housed in a special collection at the University of Stanford Library. Image: Stephen Murray Kiernan.

We had some money saved and we found a place to live. It was the most extraordinary place located on the rue de Courcelles in the seventeenth *arrondissement*. When we came in we saw all the armour of different knights. The place was enormous. But we could not find anything that would suit us. It was just gigantic and rather beautiful in a very strange way, a place that had been a clandestine casino…

As I said, it was a time when I had some money and I was able to dine well at restaurants supplied abundantly by the black market. This was a city now without censorship, in which there was no longer fear of confiscation, deportation, imprisonment or death. I enjoyed the simple

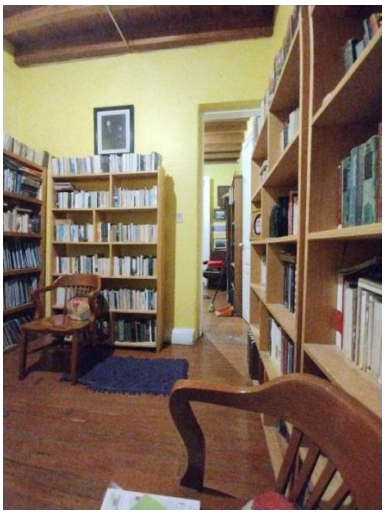
things like a colourful window suddenly reflected in the moisture of a puddle. I was in Paris and there was l'Opéra which had just started to present masterworks again. So I started to think, "I am going to become a lady!" And I was a lady for two years. I got beautiful clothes and hats. I lived nearly all the time alone because Gordian then started to find his way in what he was going to do as a journalist and documentary-maker. Every evening when I would come home from the opera or some other entertainment, I opened the visors of the armour to be sure that there weren't men inside them.

However, the great thing was that I saw a lot of André Malraux. And we became very great friends. By that time I had read all his books and I discussed them with him. His conversation greatly influenced me. The impatience I have with small talk comes straight from him – quite rudely he would remark "*Trêve de frivolités*!" to put a stop to gossipers in a room – and it still strikes me as the original sin of human discourse. But André was very tall and had very long legs, and I am not tall at all, so when André showed me Paris that meant that André walked and I ran. I know Paris very well but I first came to know it well in a hurry.

I owe the person I am to three men: my father, an extraordinary man who would occasionally invite destitute people to share our table at dinnertime and secretly donate envelopes of coins to neighbours going through a period of poverty, with his children acting as postmen of this charity; my husband, another extraordinary person; and André Malraux. (I think I should also add another man who I was to meet through the Amnesty International director Eduardo Mariño many years later in April 1973, the Mexican ecclesiastic Samuel Ruiz, a man with whom I had deep discussions about spirituality and the book of Genesis, but his profound impact on me came after the formative years of my youth and early adulthood.) These three people I owe what I am professionally and in other ways. André was terribly important in my life, especially because there was something happening in his life which as young and as stupid as I was I could help him overcome.

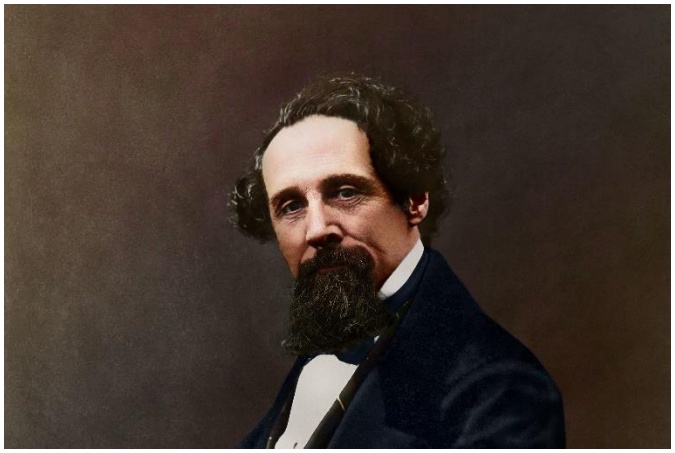
And that was he had just lost his woman, a writer herself, Josette Clotis, though they never married (and in 1961 he was to lose in a car accident the two sons he had with her). Then he had lost his half-brother Roland, who was a prisoner of war of the Germans. When they realised that they were losing they had put the prisoners into boats and put German flags on each craft. The Allies fell for the trap and he died like that from an Allied bomb attack at night. I was there when the news arrived of what had

happened. There were some cigars in the house of his sister-in-law, the concert-pianist Marie-Madeleine Lioux. When he started offering the cigars it was his way of saying that her husband – his brother – would never be back. They had a little boy, his brother and her, and he was to marry that same sister-in-law three years later. As far as I know, that same boy would be the only close relative of Malraux to survive him.



The Ruth Troeller Library, Academia Nacional de Historia y Geografía.
Image: Stephen Murray Kiernan.

Dickens and the Theatre of the Nineteenth Century



Portrait of Dickens. Image: PA Media.

Introduction

Charles Dickens' reputation as a novelist and commentator and changer of society is of course immense. What fewer people know about is Dickens' obsession with drama. He was an avid theatregoer, joined the Garrick Club for actors at the age of twenty-five and had many theatrical friends, including the great contemporary actor William Macready, to whom he dedicated *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the dramatist and novelist Wilkie Collins, with whom he wrote at least two plays and some of whose work was performed by Dickens' acting company. He visited circuses and melodrama houses; his journalism speaks of "grimacers", waxworks, freak shows, actors, gaslight fairies and clowns. Rather than the highbrow literary figure that he is mainly seen as, we could also claim him back as a man of the theatre, who captured in his writing all the scruff of the London theatrical scene, as well as the exaggerated storylines and flamboyant personalities of the Victorian drama, in a range of influences spanning the legitimate theatre (or those with full stage licences) to the penny gaffes of the gin-drinking working-class.

The Garrick Club.
Image from garrickclub.co.uk.

Destitute children in Dickens' time.
Image taken from https://povertyandsocialconscience.blogspot.com/2014/12/charles-dickens-at-christmas_23.html.

Unique in so many ways, he is certainly the only major novelist to have been a compelling performer in his own right, playing to enthralled audiences of up to four thousand all over the English-speaking world. Bernard Shaw a generation later was also in his way a similar sort of writer-performer but his journey was the exact reverse of Dickens', from failed novelist to successful dramatist. Theatre was central to his life, from his earliest years as a child entertainer in Portsmouth pubs, to his reluctant retirement from what he described as "these garish lights" barely a year before his death.

He wrote plays, he acted in them, he stage-managed them – all with fanatical perfectionism. As a writer, he was a compulsive performer. His very imagination was theatrical, his method that of the stage, both in terms of plot devices and construction of character. There is in his writing a real sense of him reaching out to his readers, like an actor performing on the stage: his public, entertaining them and needing their support and affection, speaking on their behalf, exciting them and winning their applause.

Depiction by the BBC of Dickens in the boot-blacking factory. Image: BBC archive.

Dickens originally wanted to be an actor and the background to this is helps explain both his deep and continuing interest in all things theatrical and also his unmitigated and deeply personal project to work relentlessly to achieve a higher stature in the world. There is an interesting connection between the beginnings of his interest in acting and the theatre world in general and his obsessive drive to succeed. His aunt's stepson, James Lamerte, was the person who first encouraged his interest in the theatre but was also responsible for finding him a job as a twelve-year-old in the famous boot-blacking factory in a dreadful building overrun with rats. Here he had his first experience of performing to a public: working with other boys in a large window and attracting the notice of the crowds outside resulted in a humiliation and heartbreak that left a mark all his life. (Even worse, when finally his father and the owners argued and Dickens was taken out of the factory, his mother wanted to send him back.) There are different sources in the real life of Dickens to explain certain characters, plots and even that restlessness that he shared with his contemporary Balzac and, among recent writers, Anthony Burgess: his difficult childhood, his troubled marriage, his obsessions with social reform, and his furious, compulsive behaviour.

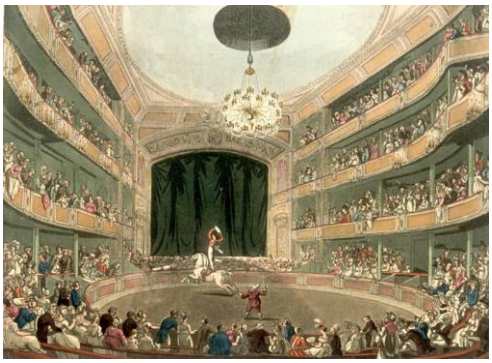
Covent Garden Theatre (legitimate). Image taken from https://tourhistoria.es/2018/12/royal-opera-house-en-covent-garden-londres/.

Wilton's Music Hall. Image: co-haute.com.

In 1832 at the age of twenty, he was accepted to do an audition at one of the great so-called "legitimate" theatres, Covent Garden, but a nasty head-cold saw him miss this appointment with destiny. He began to earn a living as a court stenographer and then journalist but, now with a growing family, he applied himself to that profession that gave him the largest and most regular income, novel-writing. Devoting himself to the stage when he was young and poor and with ten children was out of the question. Certain of his novels, though, are full of the theatre folk he met and observed: Sleary and his troupe of performers in *Hard Times* and the jolly Vincent Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby*; the flirtatious Miss Snevellicci, who "always played some part in blue silk knee-smalls at her benefit", not to mention Ninetta the Infant Phenomenon of only ten years of age.

Dicken's childhood home. Image: www.tripline.net.

In some of his very serious journalism, Dickens depicted the jobbing actors hanging around the stage door, with their "indescribable public-house swagger": one fellow is described as wearing a "faded brown coat and ... very full light green trousers", another with "dirty white Berlin gloves" pretending to wealth and propriety while concealing real poverty. There are satirical characters too: the "theatrical young gentleman" with his pretensions to information only known to those on the inside, and typical audience members at Astley's Amphitheatre (a type of enormous circus), including the moody teenage son sounding very contemporary, desperately "trying to look as if he did not belong to the family".



Astley's Amphitheatre.
Image: Coloured aquatint engraving after a drawing by A.C. Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson; first published in Rudolph Ackermann's *The Microcosm of London*, 1808.

Dickens never left performance entirely behind even as a full-time novelist. In a period of almost two decades between 1853 and his farewell tour in 1870, he delighted and even shocked audiences on both sides of the Atlantic with readings from his books. Thomas Carlyle commented in 1863 that he was "better than any Macready in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic theatre visible performing under one hat." He set his stage very carefully, with a dark-wine coloured reading stand and white kid gloves, and annotated his reading copies with stage directions such as "snap your fingers", "shudder" and the chilling "terror till the end!" With readings priced so that the ordinary working man and woman could attend, he worked through a repertoire of sixteen extracts that were both comic and tragic: the courtroom scene from *The Pickwick Papers*, the youthful romance of David Copperfield, the ever-popular "Christmas Carol", and most famously his intense rendering of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes taken from *Oliver Twist*. This last was presented in so ferocious and

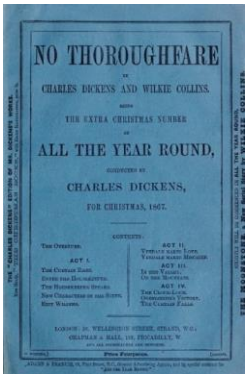
horrifying a way that in 1868 his friend and future biographer John Forster begged him to stop or he would kill himself with the effort.

Dickens giving a reading from one of his works.
Image: https://clive-w.blogspot.com/2012/10/book-review-charles-dickens-11-hard.html.

Dicken, Acting and Theatre

Dickens as an actor has been described as having "Stanislavskian" identification with the roles he played in amateur theatricals, above all the Byronic loner in the melodrama he wrote with Wilkie Collins, *The Frozen Deep*. However, his eyes were open when it came to the realities of that theatrical life: towards the end of his life Dickens warned his daughter Katey not to go on the stage, noting from experience that "although there are nice people on the stage, there are some who would make your hair stand on end" – of course, with his capacity for inducing theatrical thrills, he may well have been one of them himself. Very definitely, Charles Dickens was a man of the theatre, who loved all the life and vitality of London's theatre scene, both on stage and off it.

Wilkie Collins.
Image: Portrait by Sir John Everett Millais, 1850 – https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw01409/Wilkie-Collins

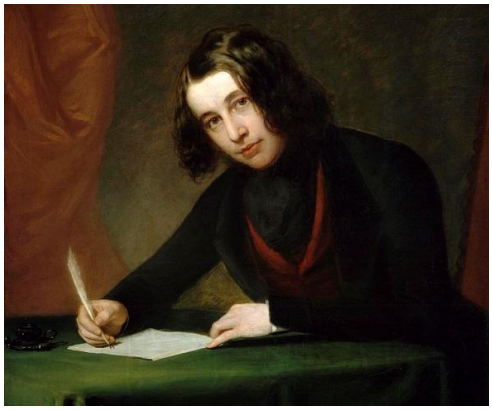


One of the plays Collins wrote with Dickens, published in the latter's magazine.
Image: https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/5660530.

Let us look at the funny, the tearful and the melodramatic in Dickens. A good place to begin appreciating Dickens as an author of works partly derived from the theatre and with great possibilities of dramatisation is the comedy in *The Pickwick Papers*. Samuel Pickwick is a glorious example of benevolence, passing through a vivacious world populated with a long sequence of hilariously extreme characters. Thereafter the following novels are almost never, even at their darkest, wholly without that fantastical comedy unique to Dickens. His people can be funny and dangerous at the same time, and another way of putting this is that his works are highly theatrical.

Dickens and his world of characters, probably his favourite place. Image: www.countrylife.co.uk.

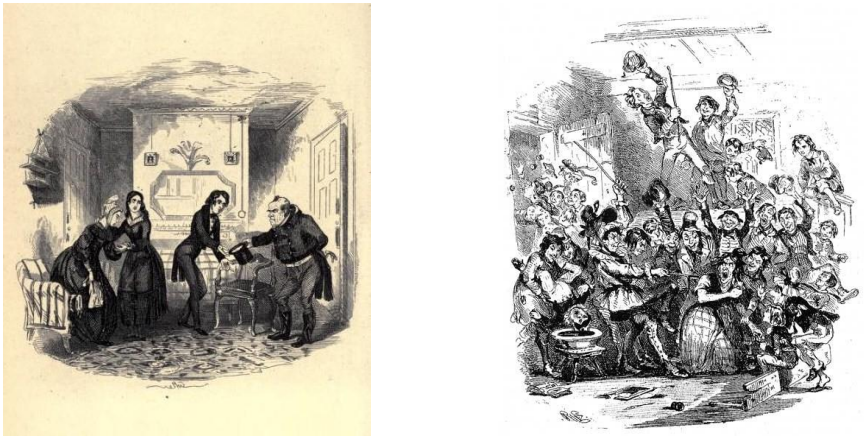
Dickens was to write plays but they are of a terrible quality not to be expected in a first-rate writer. In some ways he was so desperately in love with the theatre of his own time that he simply imitated it – effectively, bad theatre imitated badly. If he couldn't write his own plays, then other people were delighted to do it for him: his novels were endlessly adapted for the stage, often to Dickens' fury. There was a perennial race during his writing career to secure a licence for each dramatisation of a novel before it could be stolen by a bad adaptor of plays. Almost from the very beginning of Dickens' success, theatres began to do "pirate" stage versions of his novels. First there was *The Perigrinations of Pickwick*; then came *Sam Weller* by William Thomas Moncrieff. I suppose at the beginning it was flattering to Dickens to see what was happening and to know this would increase his fame and sales of his books, but he came to resent the fact that others were making money using his creations and he was getting nothing in return. This concern for copyright and "intellectual property" continued throughout Dickens' career. He spoke out forthrightly against American bootlegging of his novels during his U.S. tour of 1842, and suffered a noticeable backlash from the local newspapers and public opinion. He continued to promote what he called "the financial rewards and the status of his fellow professionals" but it would be quite some time before Dickens' view was generally accepted.



Dickens at the time of his visit to the United States in 1842. Image: www.wbur.org.

From *Pickwick* onwards they provided the leading actors of the day with wonderful parts, but their versions were generally travesties. Immense in scale of story and population of characters, any sort of transference to the stage had to involve a focus on the main scenes and population reduction. Anything more complete was beyond the possibilities of commercial theatre and too vast for the general public. There have been exceptions, though very few in number. In 1980, the state-funded Royal Shakespeare Company presented an eight-and-a-half hour version of *Nicholas Nickleby* over two evenings, which probably more than any other dramatisation

before or since did justice to the scope of a Dickens novel. The book itself is massive but a certain administration of material is achieved through the melodramatic opposition of good and evil, as identified by the names of good characters (such as Newman Noggs and the Cheryble brothers) and those of evil ones (Sir Mulberry Hawk and Arthur Gride). These are tricks of medieval morality plays updated to the nineteenth century. The main personage joins Vincent Crummles' acting troupe, a cotton-pillow of thespians – Dickens' biographer summed all this up by saying that "Everything about it has the feel of theatre." The adaptor made the inspired decision to preserve the act of storytelling in the novel by dividing it among the actors. To a vital degree, the narrator's voice in a Dickens novel – sometimes Dickens himself, sometimes one of the characters – is a crucial part of the experience of reading the book but equally its absence in a theatrical production greatly lessens the uniqueness of the work.



Illustrations for the novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839).
Image: Illustrations by Hablot Browne in the first edition of the novel.

Dickens was never truly to renounce that youthful dream that drove him to arrange and then miss a coveted audition at Covent Garden theatre. "Literature was his wife, the theatre his mistress," as Simon Callow writes, "and to the very end he was tempted to leave the one for the other." After his brief illness he continued as a junior reporter and became probably Britain's greatest novelist. One must be careful to understand that Dickens was fascinated by the histrionics expected and encouraged in the theatre: he was in practice a successful dramatist insofar as his novels could be cut down by an adapter to the attention span and tastes of the audience. A great novelist who never wrote even one more-or-less acceptable play. But as a great novelist it is unexpected that he should have spent so much time, energy and health in directing and appearing in stage productions and those exhausting public readings – unexpected I think until you realise that this imperative activity meant contact with his public and that peculiar imaginative satisfaction that actors get from inhabiting the human truth in

mind and body of stage characters. The same experience of being very aware of his audience had already occurred during the process of writing one instalment of a novel each week or month, then listening to the public reaction and occasionally changing plot according to what he heard. Like any actor, he listened to the yawns, the laughs and the shuffling in the seats.

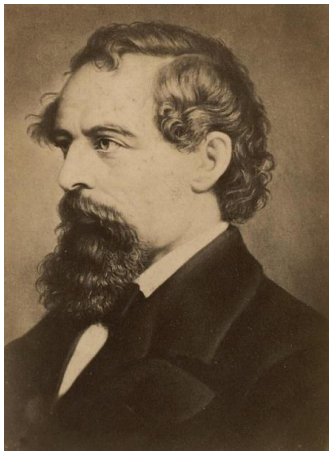
Dickens writing in 1868 shortly before his passing.
Image: Part of the collection entitled "Historical Photography Collection" at https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc791404/.

There was also something more: the man who once began his novels by performing dialogue in front of a mirror, and then sat passively in his chair writing hour after hour at his desk, is the same person who later as an actor is now more actively and intimately involved with the characters and stories he created years before. Many elements are mixed up here: there is compulsion, romance and humiliation, also a sense of release, of creation in the salon followed by recreation in the auditorium – and yes, there is also escape from the writer with feelings of inadequacy exaggerated by his time in the blacking factory, to the much-loved performer immersed in the vividness of his people and scenes. On similar lines, it must be clarified that the same histrionic over-fluidity sometimes distracted Dickens from the discipline required to write a novel with so many big and small personalities and episodes of story.

When Dickens was in his late teenage years he was a regular – and sometimes daily – attendant of the London theatre. Whether he had a natural liking for melodrama or he learned to love it and its accompanying highly gestural style of acting is open to argument. He was not always a passive spectator: he often attended theatres in the Strand and Vauxhall where it was possible to pay a small fee to participate in the performances – as Callow called it, "a sort of thespian Karaoke". In this he was considering acting and theatrics as a possible avocation. Then not long after establishing himself as a successful writer, Dickens began an

involvement with ‘amateur’ theatricals – that great pastime of the Victorian middle-class – that was to endure for the rest of his life.

He even built a theatre in his house and wore a theatrical style of clothes of striking greens and the like, about which much fun was often made, and was known to like disguises and costumes both in his fictional depictions and in real life. He would create an acting-company from family and friends, and work for weeks and even months preparing a play that would be performed in the house of one of the participants. These were often quite elaborate productions, usually organised for charity, employing all the resources of stagecraft then available at the time, in its own way reaching a level of sophistication and seriousness to be compared to the modern “community theatre” in the United States.

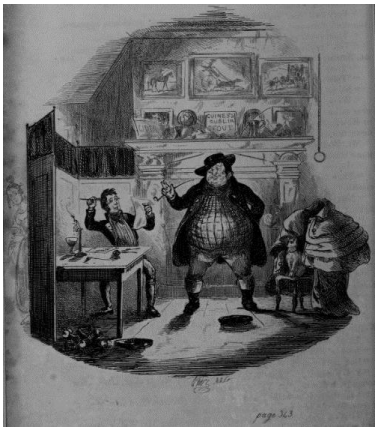


Dickens in the early 1850s.
Image: Welsh Portrait Collection at the National Library of Wales.

But he wanted to go beyond just acting, at which he was undeniably talented, to be a species of ultimate theatre impresario. He desired to do it all: casting, stage-managing, starring, setting the music, arranging the set and props, directing, producing and advertising – in this whirlwind of responsibilities he was a precursor of Charles Chaplin. He had a remarkable practical sense of theatrical possibilities: to achieve a certain effect, there is a story of him placing a piano two rooms away from the auditorium in which the staging was taking place. In this as we all know he drove himself relentlessly, demonstrating a type of enormous nervous creative and histrionic energy.

At the same time, his inability to write good plays for the stage when he was writing tremendous novels for the reading public reveals one of the central weaknesses of Dickens as a writer. One gets a sense that the necessary self-critical approach to composing drama was overpowered by his blind adoration of the stage of his day. The peculiarly *melo-fantastic* dialogue of contemporary stage-plays, as well as the technique of

alternating comic and tragic scenes in the same dramaturgy, are clearly there in the novels and stories. This was not by any standard an epoch of quality plays: men like J. M. Morton were paid by playhouses according to the number of acts they wrote, like contemporary hack-writers of *telenovelas*, to produce works of rather silly coincidence, stereotypes of situation and personality, and contrived thrills, for an audience composed of the lower social classes. This audience was devoid of the sense of embarrassment experienced by the richer and better educated, who if they did get involved in anything similar, stuck to their amateur theatricals, music and opera.



Two of his best-loved creations: Micawber and Pickwick.
Images: Fred Barnard (*David Copperfield* 1912 edition) Immediate source: http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/1912/9.html and Hablot Knight Browne (*The Pickwick Papers*) https://archive.org/stream/posthumouspapers021837dick#page/n421/mode/2up

The Dickens who is revealed in the *Selected Letters* is a grim, strange and even slightly mad workaholic. His colleague G. H. Lewes said his genius was close to lunacy, since characters came to him in hallucinations and then took over his body, compelling him to act out their eccentricities and prejudices. He sometimes wrote letters in their voices, for example on occasion adopting the verbose manner of Micawber. More literally, he needed to see the people he described, and some of the most interesting letters consist of instructions sent to the illustrators whose job it was to draw such monsters as Quilp the dwarf, the pickled Mrs. Gamp and Miss Havisham, the decaying virgin. These creations do belong to an old tradition but they are also deeply personal. There is very palpably a sense of humour and a darkness within Dickens. He described the coming of a new book as "the first shadows of a story hovering in a ghostly way about me" – emanating from a vivid and awful dream, or the sights and sounds of a walk through London at night. There is a story that he even employed

his occult mental powers in hypnotism to banish the neurotic demons that had taken over the wife of the Swiss banker.

The obviously nervous Fagin in his cell.
Image: 'Kyd' (Joseph Clayton Clarke), 1889) – Watercolour of Fagin.

The energy he emitted was freakish, indeed dangerous to his health. He frequently compared himself to a steam engine and, while in Boston, told a friend to "convey yourself back to London by the agency of that powerful locomotive, your imagination", like the one that glares with a diabolic red eye at Carker in *Dombey and Son* before it crushes him to a pulp. His own creative process, like the technology of his epoch, depended on violent over-heating, with a constant risk of explosion. In this way characters poured out of him with astonishing reproductive speed – a real factory of humans manufactured with pen, ink and paper. The prose came out in the same manner, in enormous quantities, as idiosyncratic and contagiously imitable in its own way as that of Hemingway.

Bill Sikes and his bullied pet. Image: Fred Barnard, a c.1870s photogravure illustration to Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

But as with a senior Greek god, he also reserved the right to execute characters when it pleased him, as in the death of Little Nell or the murder of Nancy. He wrote about this last homicide in 1838 and thirty years later, in 1868, he reworked the scene for his reading tours. At first he confessed that its histrionic savagery made him "afraid of it", then after giving an impassioned performance he reported to a friend that "the crime being comfortably off my mind and the blood spilled, I am (like many of my fellow criminals) in a highly edifying state today." By his mid-fifties he was suffering occasional seizures but attributed his exhaustion to “too much railway shaking”. After one show he could hardly manage to undress himself. He persisted with it against medical advice, since his pulse rate accelerated from 72 to 112 at every performance; eventually the strain brought on the cerebral haemorrhage that killed him at the age of only fifty-eight two years later. Funnily enough, this sequestration of Dickens in a performance contrasts very deeply with the benevolence and mutual congratulation to be seen in his depiction of the Crummles troupe of itinerant players in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

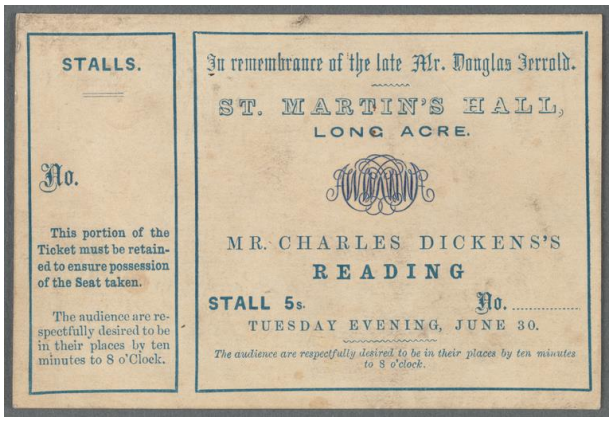
Dickens’ skills as a performer also showed up in his oratorical talent – his ability to deliver what appeared to be improvised speeches for the many public occasions he participated in. In fact, though they were delivered without notes, many of the speeches were prepared in his head during extended walks in the country. His method was that he would establish the different topics he would be covering, then arrange them mentally on a cart-wheel and, as he delivered the oration, he would be seen to gesture as though he were checking off each spoke of the wheel as he progressed.

Modern depiction of a Dickens reading:
the actor and biographer Simon Cowell.
Image: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09k6bj9.

The final phase of Dickens’ life was dominated by his public readings. To some extent this had already started when the illiterate poor would

contribute a ha'penny to have the latest weekly or monthly instalment of a novel read to them. He would perform selected scenes from his most popular and best-loved books. There is something very *completing* of this process of fictional creation: the writer of each of these people would now return to enter the mind and sensibilities of his creation as a performer. Dickens himself was physically not that dominating – not tall and rather thin and he gave people the impression of being emotional – and thus had to make greater effort at his work than say someone like Orson Welles. (Indeed the comparison can be continued: like Welles, he was a fanatic of hypnotism and magic.)

But the presence of this little man on the stage perhaps made him all the more credible as a reader: there is little to impede the required empathy between performer and audience. Of course his great fame would have helped in any case. At the personal level he had that tendency to listen intently and to laugh that makes a person agreeable company. He had a light voice with traces of a lisp, with a great natural ability for accent and changing the volume of his delivery, as when his voice boomed when performing the murder of Nancy from *Oliver Twist*. It is important to remember that these presentations were not straight readings; Dickens went beyond that, he gave dramatic performances. And of course each one of these performances – eventually hundreds of them – took a significant physical and emotional toll out of him, and accelerated his early death.



Ticket for a Charles Dickens Reading at St. Martin's Hall, London, 30 June, 1867.
Image: The New York Public Library Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bece4260-5e17-0137-ad71-05159bb38b26.

Now not even the novels took first place because not even they brought him the direct experience of transforming himself completely into a

fictional character in front of a hypnotised public. The element of speaking to the common man on grave social preoccupations should not be underestimated, either as an attraction to his audience to come to listen to him nor as an influence on their opinion. The range was also strangely diverse, from the profound and sublime to the coarse and fantastically simplified. Neither did his publications render him the same high level of profit. It all began with a few presentations of "A Christmas Carol" for charity. Dickens took note of how much money was earned and he realised that speaking tours could be a major new source of income. There is a story that in the early 1860s, at the height of his fame, he was offered the fortune of £10,000 for an eight-month tour of Australia but he turned down the offer with great reluctance.

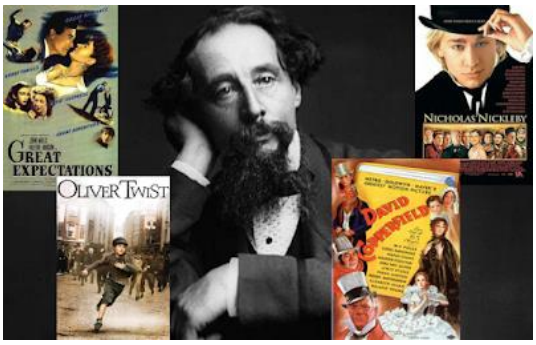
Illustrations from "A Christmas Carol".
Images: Original illustrations by John Leech from the 1843 edition, British Library Digital Collection.

Conclusion

Dickens' dedication to the theatre was not because of any obvious availability of free time and excess of energy. Before he turned thirty, he had already written five novels and dozens of short stories, been a star reporter, edited a monthly magazine and started a family of ten children. He was a social activist, constant traveller, addicted to writing letters, and of course a public speaker – and they were just the small jobs outside the work of writing these massively complex novels which would have required immense organisational ability and memory of character and plot development in order for them not to fall into chaos.

The older Dickens (c. 1868).
Image: Jeremiah Gurney – Heritage Auction Gallery.

The somewhat actorly method that Dickens adapted to compose his books often involved observing people and what they said – what he called "reproducing in my own person what I observed in others" –, then reworking this in a dramatic way perhaps by performing it in front of a mirror, and then by writing down what he thought was appropriate and sufficiently interesting. But of course the process in certain cases didn't end there as he would later bring the episode back alive as the writer-actor in the public hall. One can see that this approach helped Dickens to individualise his cast of people: to turn sketch into story, 'character' into person, to present satiric, pathetic, humorous and semi-tragic episodes to the reading public and later the observing-listening public. The narrative prose, dialogue, situations and characterisation that this method produced are heavily influenced by a background in and liking for that semi-real world of the theatrical melodrama.



Dickens on film. Image: https://reviewsofthebosch.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-top-ten-best-dickens-movies.html.

The episodic novel of which he was a master is the progenitor of some of the best drama we see on television today and his novels are probably famous now more because of their movie and television adaptations, for which they are extraordinary in their capacity to be adapted to modern media in the most entertaining way. Recent times have seen the novels in new reincarnations, from the famous movie versions such as *A Tale of Two Cities (1935), David Copperfield* (1935), *Great Expectations* (1946) and *A Christmas Carol* (1951), to the great, detailed reworkings on television, particularly those by the BBC. Indeed, though motion pictures have presented marvellous versions of Dickens' work – the most impacting scenes in the two great David Lean films are of isolated and ravaged figures, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* and Fagin in his cell in *Oliver Twist* – television is the great medium for dramatisations of Dickens. However, of all works of fiction written in English in the nineteenth century, perhaps only those of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters are still as widely read and no-one else has had as much impact on laws, perspectives and imaginative possibilities as Dickens. I would imagine he would still make a decent income from sales of his tomes if he were still alive today, and undoubtedly the BBC and Hollywood would be paying him millions.

"Dickens World" amusement park.
Image: https://www.kentonline.co.uk/whats-on/news/dickens-world-a-great-idea-38285/.

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