

# DICKENS IN CANADA

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DICKENS visited Canada in 1842. He may be said to have taken the country in his stride on his way to and from the United States. One might have considered his visit as merely fortuitous because Halifax happened to be his first landfall. But the fortuitousness is disproved by the fact that he returned to Canada *via* Buffalo before leaving on his return journey to England.

The January voyage on the Cunarder the *Britannia*, "steam-packet," was to Boston by way of Halifax. It took 15 days to reach Halifax. It has been made memorable by those pages of very fine descriptive writing on an Atlantic crossing at its worst. In spite of storm and dangers, the coast of Nova Scotia loomed up at last on the 20 January. So exceptional, indeed, had been the weather, and so skilful the captain (Hewitt) that he was presented later with a piece of plate by the thankful passengers, and the dedicatory words were written by Dickens. But their troubles had not yet ended. Halifax proved evasive, for, as Dickens writes in a letter to John Forster, his friend and biographer, on 21 January, 1842:

We were running into Halifax Harbour . . . with little wind and a bright moon; had made the light at its outer entrance, and given the ship in charge to the pilot; were playing our rubber, all in good spirits (for it had been comparatively smooth for some days, with tolerable dry decks and other unusual comforts). when suddenly the ship STRUCK!. A rush upon deck followed of course. The men (I mean the crew! think of this) were kicking off their shoes and throwing off their jackets preparatory to swimming ashore; the pilot was beside himself; the passengers dismayed and everything in the most intolerable confusion and hurry. Breakers were roaring ahead; the land within a couple of hundred yards; and the vessel driving upon the surf, although the paddles were working backwards, and everything done to stay her course. It is not the custom of steamers, it seems, to have an anchor ready. An accident occurred in getting ours over the sides; and for half an hour we were throwing up rockets, burning blue lights, and firing signals of distress, all of which remained unanswered, though we were so close to the shore that we could see the waving branches of the trees. All this time, as we veered about, a man was heaving the lead every two minutes; the depths of the water constantly decreasing; and nobody self-possessed but Hewitt. They let go the anchor at last, got

\*Of London, England. These extracts, with the running commentary, will, it is hoped, send readers back to Dickens.

out of a boat, and sent her ashore with the fourth Officer, the pilot and four men aboard, to try and find out where we were. The pilot had no idea, but Hewitt put his little finger upon a certain part of the chart, and was as confident of the exact spot (though he had never been there in his life) as if he had lived there from infancy. The boat's return about an hour afterwards proved him to be quite right. We had got into a place called the Eastern-passage, in a sudden fog and through the pilot's folly. We had struck upon a mud-bank, and driven into a perfect little pond, surrounded by banks and rocks and shoals of all kinds; the only safe speck in the place. Eased by this report, and the assurance that the tide was passed the ebb, we turned in at three o'clock in the morning to lie there all night.

There is a more condensed version of the above in *American Notes* and some variations, thus, for instance, the light at the outer entrance had been made and the pilot put in charge. Nevertheless, the ship ran onto a mud-bank, but soon got off. The development of a fog was partly to blame that the real entrance had been missed. The account continues:

The next morning in bright sunshine the *Britannia* steamed safely into Halifax Harbour down a smooth, broad stream, at the rate of eleven miles an hour: our colors flying gaily; our crew rigged out in their smartest clothes; our officers in uniform again, the sun shining as on a brilliant April day in England; the land stretched out on either side, streaked with light patches of snow, white wooden houses; people at their doors; telegraphs working; flags hoisted; wharfs appearing; ships; quays crowded with people; distant noises; shouts; men and boys running down steep places towards the pier; all more bright and gay and fresh to our unused eyes than words can paint them. We came to a wharf paved with uplifted faces; got alongside, and were made fast, after some shouting and straining of cables; darted a score of us along the gangway, a most as soon as it was thrust out to meet us, and before it had reached the ship—and leaped upon the firm glad earth again.

The town is built on the side of a hill, the highest point being commanded by a strong fortress, not yet quite finished. Several streets of good breadth and appearance extend from its summit to the water-side, and are intersected by cross streets running parallel with the river. The houses are chiefly of wood. The market is abundantly supplied; and provisions are exceedingly cheap. The weather being unusually mild at that time for the season of the year, there was no sleighing: but there were plenty of those vehicles in yards and by-places, and some of them, from the gorgeous quality of their decorations, might have "gone on" with out alteration as triumphal cars in a melodrama at Astley's. The day was uncommonly fine; the air bracing and healthful; the whole aspect of the town cheerful, thriving and industrious. (*American Notes Ch. II*)

From the above we obtain a vivid picture of perhaps a less said Halifax; certainly a gayer, less impersonal and more friendly. The tempo was slower than to-day, and the place more intimate. But this is a fleeting view of Halifax over a century ago; yet in spite of the course of time and the great changes that it has brought with it, Dickens caught the atmosphere of Halifax; much of that selfsame atmosphere (*mutatis mutandis*) obtains today. There is perhaps no town in Canada that possesses more of an old-world English coastal port character; and it is just as "un-American" as Quebec. "I suppose," writes Dickens, "this Halifax would have appeared an Elysium, though it had been a curiosity of ugly dulness. But I carried away with me a most pleasant impression of the town and its inhabitants, and have preserved it to this hour. Nor was it without regret that I came home, without having found an opportunity of returning thither." (*American Notes*, Ch. II.)

On the one day (21 Jan.) Dickens was at Halifax he was able to attend the opening of the Legislative Council and General Assembly. There are two versions of this: the one in *American Notes*, the other in the above-mentioned letter to John Forster. The former is the more kindly and brief, the latter more detailed and written with that acerbity that usually came over Dickens when touching on parliament and government.

In *American Notes* we read that at the opening of the Council and Assembly the ceremonial observed on the commencement of a new Session of Parliament in England was so closely copied, and so gravely presented on a small scale, that it was like looking at Westminster through the wrong end of a telescope. The governor, (Lord Falkland) as her Majesty's representative, delivered what may be called the Speech from the Throne. He said what he had to say manfully and well. The military band outside the building struck up "God Save the Queen" with great vigour before his Excellency had quite finished; the people shouted; the in's rubbed their hands; the out's shook their heads; the Government party said there never was such a good speech; the Opposition declared there never was such a bad one; the Speaker and members of the House of Assembly withdrew from the bar to say a great deal among themselves and do a little; and, in short, everything went on, and promised to go on, just as it does at home upon the like occasions. In the Forster version (28 Jan., 1842) the visit

to the opening of the Council and Assembly appears less voluntary. The Speaker of the House of Assembly had obviously been officially delegated to take charge of Dickens, as is shown in the following extract:

Then, sir, comes a breathless man who has been already into the ship and out again, shouting my name as he tears along . . . The breathless man introduces himself as the Sepaker of the House of Assembly; *will* drag me away to his house; and *will* have a carriage, and his wife sent for Kate (Mrs. Dickens), who is laid up . . . Then he drags me to the governor's house, and then Heaven knows where; concluding with both houses of parliament; which happen to meet for the session that very day, and are opened by a mock speech from the throne delivered by the governor, with one of Lord Grey's sons for his aide-de-camp, and a great host of officers about him. I wish you could have seen the crowds cheering the inimitable\* in the streets. I wish you could have seen judges, law-officers, bishops, and law-makers welcoming the inimitable. I wish you could have seen the inimitable shown to a great elbow-chair by the Speaker's throne, and sitting alone in the middle of the house of commons, the observed of all observers, listening with exemplary gravity to the queerest speaking possible.

On the evening of the 21 January the *Britannia*, with Dickens on board, left for Boston and ran into dirty weather in the Bay of Fundy. It was from Boston that Dickens travelled slowly through the States till he finally reached Canada via Cincinnati, Sandusky, Cleveland and Buffalo, *i.e.* skirting the southern shores of Lake Erie, and crossing into Canada at Niagara. A letter written 1.5.42 to Henry Austin, his brother-in-law, breathes a sigh of relief at having temporarily left the U. S. A., where his popularity led to what he regarded as tantamount to "incessant persecutions of the people, by land and water, on stage-coach, railway-car, and steamer." The Dickenses had the hotel to themselves, and it was so close to the Falls "that the windows are always wet and dim with spray." From their rooms they could see the Falls "rolling and tumbling, and roaring and leaping. . . . When the sun is on them they shine and glow like molten lead. When the day is gloomy, the water falls like snow, or sometimes it seems to crumble away like the face of a great chalk cliff, or sometimes again to roll along the front of the rock like white smoke. From the bottom of both Falls there is always rising up a solemn ghostly cloud, which hides the boiling cauldron from human sight, a

\* One of the many jocular names Dickens had conferred on himself.

makes it in its mystery a hundred times more grand than if you could see all the secrets that lie hidden in its tremendous depth." (*American Notes*.)

Of the English garrison at Niagara he writes:

The quarters of our soldiers . . . are finely and airily situated. Some of them are large detached houses on the plain above the Falls, which were originally designed for hotels, and in the evening time, when the women and children were leaning over the balconies watching the men as they played at ball and other games upon the grass, . . . they presented a little picture of cheerfulness and animation which made it quite a pleasure to pass that way.

With the garrison so near the International Boundary, desertion to the United States was rife, but Dickens opines that conditions there did not often come up to expectations and that many would have returned had it not been for fear of punishment. It makes strange reading today that "several men were drowned in the attempt to swim across, not long ago; and one, who had the madness to trust himself upon a table as a raft, was swept down to the Whirlpool where his mangled body eddied round and round some days."

From Queenston our traveller went by steamboat to Toronto. When at the former place, he was incensed by the then neglected state of Brock's monument. The Toronto Dickens saw over a century ago is still recognizable. It was "full of life and motion, bustle, business and improvement." The streets were well paved and lighted with gas; the houses were large and good, the shops excellent, their displays rivalled those of England. The College of Upper Canada was praised as providing a sound education "in every department of polite learning." The annual charge for each pupil did not exceed nine pounds. Torontonians will read with comprehension that "the first stone of a new college had been laid but a few days before by the Governor General. It will be a handsome, spacious edifice, approached by a long avenue, which is already available as a public walk." They will appreciate that "the footways in the thoroughfares which lie beyond the principal streets are planked like floors," as are, indeed, those of the principal street of many a small Canadian Western town today.

Political differences when Dickens (who had a keen eye for them) was in Toronto seem to have been disorderly. Guns had been discharged from a window at one of the candidates,

and a coachman had been "actually shot in the body." But then, Toronto was considerably nearer to the Wild West in those days than it ever was later. One man was killed, "and from the very window whence he received his death, the very flag which shielded his murderer was displayed again on the occasion of the public ceremony performed by the Governor-General." In a letter to Forster (12.5.42) he remarks that "the wild and rabid toryism of Toronto, is, I speak seriously, *appalling*."

After spending a night in Toronto, Dickens proceeded to Kingston, calling at Port Hope and Coburg; the citizens of the latter place will be proud to learn that it was a cheerful thriving little town already a century ago. It was there that over a thousand barrels of flour were taken on board.

Kingston, then the seat of government, Dickens considered a "very poor town" that had been devastated by a recent fire. "Indeed, it may be said of Kingston, that one half of it appears to be burnt down, and the other half not to be built up. The Government House, though the only one of any pretence to importance was "neither elegant nor commodious." On the other hand there was an admirable jail. Throughout the U. S., and during his brief stay in Canada Dickens always made a point of visiting prisons, as he was an advocate of prison reform. We must remember, however, that had *American Notes* been written today it might have borne the sub-title "A Sociological Study." Be all this as it may, the hospitality Dickens met at the hands of Kingston was as great as any where in Canada. "We had no less than *five* carriages at Kingston waiting our pleasure at one time; not to mention the commodore's barge and crew, and a beautiful government steamer. We dined with Sir Charles Bagot." Considerable light is thrown on the relations between Canada and her southern neighbour by the statement that "there is a bomb-proof fort here of great strength, which occupies a bold position, and is capable of doing good service; though the town is much too close upon the frontier," now changed to 'border; which has much more pacific implication.

Dickens left Kingston for Montreal on 10 May, and he would not have been himself had he not touched eloquently on the beauties of the trip through the Thousand Islands. "The number and constant succession of these islands all green and richly wooded; their fluctuating sizes, some so large that for half an hour together one among them will appear as the

opposite bank of the river, and some so small that they are mere dimples on its broad bosom; their infinite variety of shapes; and the numberless combinations of beautiful forms from which the trees growing on them present: all form a picture fraught with uncommon interest and pleasure." (*American Notes*)

As Montreal was approached on a four-hour coach journey, Dickens was struck by the well-cultivated country that was "perfectly French in every respect; in the appearance of the cottages; the air, the language, the dress of the peasantry: the sign-boards on the shops and taverns: and the Virgin's shrines, and crosses, by the wayside. Nearly every common labourer and boy, though he had no shoes, wore round his waist a sash of some bright colour: generally red: and the women, who were working in the fields and gardens, and doing all kinds of husbandry, wore, one and all, great flat straw hats with most capacious brims. There were Catholic Priests and Sisters of Charity in the village streets; and images of the Saviour at the corners of cross-roads, and in other public places."

The final stage (nine miles) of the journey to Montreal was made by boat, and the city reached on 12 May. Dickens stayed there a fortnight, leaving on 26 May. Nevertheless, we have very little information about his impressions, probably because he spent most of his time directing some plays got up by the officers of the Coldstream Guards, then stationed in Montreal. The plays were performed (as private theatricals) at the Queen's Theatre on 25 May and were the one-acters: *A Roland for an Oliver*, *Past Two O'clock in the Morning*, and *Deaf as a Post*. Dickens played in all three; Mrs. Dickens in *Deaf as a Post*. The play-bill was printed in the *Gazette* office, and there is a replica of it in Forster's *Life*.

From Montreal Dickens visited Quebec on one of the then already popular night trips. He, like everyone who has visited that city, was much struck by the appearance of the old town. "The impression made upon a visitor by this Gibraltar of America: its giddy heights: its citadel suspended, as it were, in the air; its picturesque steep streets and frowning gateways; and the splendid views which burst upon the eye at every turn: is at once unique and lasting." (*American Notes*).

It is true that Dickens had not travelled much (except in England) before he went to North America; nevertheless, however widely he might have travelled he could not have written more truly about Quebec than when he remarks: "It is a place not to be forgotten or mixed up in the mind with other places, or altered for a moment in the crowd of scenes a traveller can

recall. Apart from the realities of this most picturesque city, there are associations clustering about it which would make a desert rich in interest."

A problem that naturally occupied Dickens, both in Montreal and Quebec, was that of the many emigrants (mostly Irish and Scots) arriving in Canada. He was touched by their good-natured resourcefulness and helpfulness under very adverse circumstances, and drew on his observations in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when he describes the Atlantic voyage of Mark Tapley and Martin in the steerage. He also devotes considerable space in *American Notes* and his letters to praising their behaviour and speculating as to how it would compare with that of the well-nurtured had they been confronted with the same conditions.

On 29 May Dickens was back in Montreal and left from there the next day for New York, crossing to La Prairie by boat, thence by rail to St. John's, where he was entertained by the English officers of the garrison. "Our last greeting in Canada was from the English Officers in the pleasant barracks at that place. . . ; and with 'Rule Britannia' sounding in our ears soon left it behind."