BOOK REVIEW

Dickens & the Workhouse. Oliver Twist & the London Poor
R Richardson
Oxford University Press 2012

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It was inevitable that the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) would be attended with a variety of publications to celebrate the writer’s anniversary, notable amongst which is the biography by Claire Tomalin.¹ The breadth of Dickens’s concerns, as reflected in his novels and journalism, was very extensive and included medical topics. At his death in 1870, the Lancet praised Dickens for his efforts to ameliorate conditions in workhouse infirmaries² whilst the British Medical Journal noted the accuracy of his descriptions of certain medical conditions.³ Hence, Dickens is of interest to historians of medicine.⁴,⁵,⁶

In his lecture to the Liverpool Medical History Society, delivered 18 April 2012, Sir Iain Chalmers mentioned in passing not only that he was born in Liverpool but also that he had trained in medicine at the Middlesex Hospital, an institution which is now no more than a “hole in the ground”.⁷ Although this is true of the main hospital, one part in fact does still remain, namely the old Annexe and Outpatient Department on Cleveland Street. This building is the focus of Ruth Richardson’s book, since it is her belief that this is the building which, in an earlier guise, namely the Cleveland Street Workhouse, inspired Dickens’s descriptions of workhouse life in his novel Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy’s Progress (1838). Dickens visited, and wrote about, other London workhouses in subsequent years, at Marylebone in 1850 (not identified as

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such in the original publication) and at Wapping in 1860, so evidently workhouses were a subject of continuing concern for him. His descriptions of the plight of epileptics in the workhouse have attracted recent attention.

Some of Dickens’s early years, 1815-1817 and 1829-1831, were lived at 10 Norfolk Street, which is now part of Cleveland Street and only a few doors away from the site of the workhouse. This early residence is apparently largely neglected in standard Dickens biographies, possibly because Dickens himself chose to say little about these particular social origins, as with his menial work in the blacking factory undertaken initially when his father was imprisoned for bankruptcy. Ruth Richardson suggests that during this time Dickens may have encountered other young employees, parish apprentices, with inside information about the Cleveland Street Workhouse. Furthermore, during his second period of residence in Norfolk Street, by which time his career as a short hand writer was taking off, he may have learned more about the workings of the workhouse from local tradespeople, including his landlord, Mr Dodd.

As anyone familiar with Ruth Richardson’s works would anticipate, much fascinating circumstantial evidence in support of these suggestions is adduced. There is much about the topography of this area of London, as well as about Dickens’s early life there, the New Poor Law of 1834 and its workings, and the intersection of these factors, particularly what use Dickens may have made of his early experiences in his fiction, most particularly in *Oliver Twist*. For example, the author cites (p 260) the use of local street names for fictional characters in the book, to which I would venture to suggest a further addition, first noted when I worked at Queen Square in London: could Brownlow Mews, parallel to Doughty Street, whither Dickens moved in 1837, about the time he was writing *Twist*, have been the origin for the name of Oliver’s protector, Mr Brownlow (the Mews acting as a Muse, as it were)? This Dickensian tendency to co-opt names extended beyond streets, for example both Pickwick and Bardell refer to modes of public transportation in and around London.

The whole is compellingly written and beautifully produced and

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10 A.J. Larner, ‘Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and epilepsy’, *Epilepsy Behav.*, 24 (2012), 422-5.
illustrated, in part with photographs taken by the author. The style is chatty and discursive, appropriate to a popular history, as encountered in the author’s previous book on Henry Gray and his famous Anatomy\(^{12}\) (on which she lectured at the LMI, 11 November 2009).\(^{13}\) However, Ruth Richardson cannot entirely forego the rigorous scholarship of the professional historian, so evident in her seminal work on *Death, dissection, and the destitute*,\(^{14}\) (the Anatomy Act of 1832 is briefly discussed here as well). She bemoans her lack of opportunity to pursue all the sources (e.g. reading articles in back issues of *The Dickensian*) and indicates where further work is needed, work which she would no doubt have done herself were it not for the demands of publication deadlines related to the Dickensian anniversary. The book is liberally, rather than densely, footnoted (the footnotes go briefly awry, at Chapter 9, p 258 n28). Nevertheless, because of the many lacunae in the historical record, this is in many ways a work of imagination, of informed speculation, rather than dry historical scholarship (count the number of usages of might have been/could have been/must have been/possibly). The thesis is not, and probably cannot be, proven.

The campaign to save the Cleveland Street Workhouse from the same fate as the Middlesex Hospital succeeded, at least in part because of the work documented in this book, so the author merits the congratulations of posterity for both this and her book, achievements which will further stimulate Dickens scholarship for years to come.