
In 'Towards a New Transatlanticism: Dickens in the United States', Amanda Claybaugh calls for a new way of thinking about Britain and the U.S. together in the nineteenth-century. This 'new transatlanticism', as she calls it, focusses on the 'material networks' that connected Britain and the U.S. in the nineteenth-century. Claybaugh is interested in two of these 'material networks' in particular: 'print culture' and 'social reform'. 'Social reform' especially refers to prison reform, the suffrage movement, and the anti-slavery campaign. Claybaugh uses her 'new transatlanticism' to think about how American Notes for General Circulation (1842) explores the possibility of collaborative reformist efforts between Britain and the America. Claybaugh then argues that Dickens’s disillusionment with the U.S., along with his frustration at America’s insufficient copyright laws, eventually led him to renounce the transatlantic networks he had once been so excited about.

Dickens was not the first British person to write about America’s institutions of reform. Dickens owned 27 'tour books’ of America: they typically described American manners and sights to see, but also, like American Notes, depicted the prisons, asylums, and poor houses of the U.S. Claybaugh focusses on Dickens’s ambivalence about suffrage reform in American Notes, Dickens’s own ‘tour book’. On the one hand, he ‘came to the United States fully alive to the reform possibilities of the tour and the travel book’, and thought American republicanism could be ‘a peaceful alternative to what he took to be the violence of the Chartists.’ On the other hand, ‘Dickens’s experience of American manners famously turned him against democracy’. As such, he ‘recorded many of his complaints in American Notes and, in doing so, contributed to discourse opposing suffrage reform.’

The representation of slavery in American Notes is similarly complex. On the one hand, Dickens utterly abhorred slavery, and hoped that his tour book could expose its horrors by representing it from a less familiar perspective. This is a strategy that Claybaugh calls the ‘defamiliarisation’ of slavery. On the other hand, Dickens never made it further south than Virginia, claiming that he was so haunted by slavery he could not bear to see it.

Dickens did, however, append a whole chapter on ‘Slavery’ to American Notes. It is a reprinting of Thomas Weld’s pamphlet American Slavery As It Is (1839). Dickens’s reprinting of the pamphlet is at odds with his desire that copyright should be more rigidly protected. Weld’s pamphlet itself involved reprinting, as Weld reproduced excerpts from Southern newspapers in which slaveowners described the wounds inflicted on missing slaves so that they might be returned to their owners. Weld redistributed this ‘grim catalogue of injury’ to a wider audience. Dickens, too, imagined a wider, transatlantic public sphere, and reprinted Weld’s pamphlet for that larger public to see. ‘In this way, the “Slavery” chapter returns the slaveowners’ words back to the Southern states, but only after passing them through the defamiliarizing perspective of the quite different, non-slaveowning public of the Northern states and Great Britain.’ It is in this defamiliarizing project that we find Dickens at his most ‘transatlantic’.

Dickens soon retreated from these transatlantic networks of print and reform movements. Along with being angered by America’s insufficient copyright laws, Dickens received hostile reviews of his travel book. ‘As a consequence, Dickens began to withdraw from the very Anglo-American networks that his tour and travel book had exemplified.’ Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-4) is the logical conclusion of Dicken's retreat from an Anglo-American worldview in that it ‘posits an absolute separation between the two nations that Dickens knew did not exist.’ In Martin Chuzzlewit Dickens ‘suggests that there can be no fellowship between antislavery activists in Britain and the United States’. Dickens’s renunciation of transnational reform culminates in Bleak House (1852-3), with its scathing depiction of the Jellyby family’s overseas charitable efforts. ‘It is through local attention, Bleak House insists, that the nation as a whole will be remade.’