

THE BACKGROUND TO SKETCHES BY BOZ

Neil McEwan

Thea Holme was wrong to say, in the Introduction to **Sketches by Boz** in the 'Oxford Illustrated Dickens', that 'Here was Boz, reflecting a completely new outlook, the outlook of the man in the street'.¹ When **Sketches** was first published as a book, in two volumes in 1836, collecting newspaper and magazine pieces of the previous three years, it was thought in literary circles to be the work of Leigh Hunt, whose **London Journal** (1834-5) had included many sketches of London life comparable to those of Dickens and written from the point of view of the man in the street. Dickens informed his publisher John Macrone, as a good jest — but probably with pride, that 'the editor of the **Court Journal** told a friend of mine, as a mighty secret, that Boz was done by Leigh Hunt, and someone else'.² It has often been suggested that Hunt's descriptions of London were a model for Dickens.³ In fact, Hunt was only one of many journalists, mostly anonymous or soon forgotten, who sketched London scenes from the point of view of the ordinary newspaper-reader. Boz soon came to be incomparable, but his earliest writings were less original — indeed less unusual — than Thea Holme assumed.

Boz certainly wrote for the man in the street. Many of his best pieces were descriptions of the streets, written for the **Evening Chronicle**, to be read by Londoners going home in cabs and carriages, or sitting at the windows of cafes and clubs. The first

of the **Chronicle** sketches was 'Hackney-Coach Stands'.⁴ 'There is a hackney-coach stand under the very window at which we are writing', says Boz, and his readers would have looked out for one.⁵ Dickens encouraged them to look more closely and to find interest and humour in the commonplace. There are characteristic touches of whimsy; it is said of a pair of horses that 'now and then one of them lifts his mouth to the ear of his companion, as if he were saying, in a whisper, that he should like to assassinate the coachman'.⁶ Equally Dickensian is the sense of bustle:

*The servant-girl, with pink ribbons, at No. 5, opposite, suddenly opens the street-door, and four small children forthwith rush out, and scream 'Coach!' with all their might and main. The waterman darts from the pump, seizes the horses by their respective bridles, and drags them, and the coach too, round to the house, shouting all the time for the coachman...*⁷

Like 'Hackney-Coach Stands', the sketches which followed in the **Evening Chronicle** in the early months of 1835 show Dickens's inexhaustible fascination with the London streets. 'Early Coaches', 'London Recreations', 'Gin Shops', 'The Pawnbroker's Shop', 'Our Parish', 'Scotland Yard', 'Doctor's Commons' are among the best. In these, and in the stories and character portraits for the **Monthly Magazine** and **Bell's Life**, we see the skill in recording city scenes which was to be so effective in the novels.

Other writers shared his interest if not his skill. The now all but forgotten Cornelius Webbe published a sketch-book not unlike Dickens's, **Glances at Life in City and Suburb**, in 1836, the year of **Sketches by Boz**. 'Half of London is a *terra incognita* to many', he wrote there, and 'A man — and a man of observation too — may live all his life in London and not see one half of what is to be seen in it'.⁸ Dickens would have agreed. Some of Webbe's 'Views of London' had appeared in the **New Monthly Magazine** in 1833. Dickens may have read them, and he may have known Webbe's earlier collection of sketches, **The Posthumous Papers** (a title which **Pickwick** echoes), published in 1828. An anonymous series in the **New Monthly** in 1829, under the heading 'Londoniana', began with a sketch of 'The Streets':

*Among the endless variety of subjects for the pen... afforded by this immense metropolis, I do not recollect to have seen the streets touched upon. I do not mean them in their brick garb... but their eternally moving scenery also.*⁹

The article which followed took the reader into parts of London which he may well have avoided in real life: 'into the retired courts and alleys', 'labyrinths of vicious characters'; later contributions in the series treated more respectable regions of town. John Poole's **Sketches and Recollections** (1835) was a more extensive collection of such pictures of London's 'moving scenery'. **Kidd's London Directory** (1837) brought together four

booklets of realistic sketches which had been published earlier in the 1830s; the best of these was **London and all its Miseries**. The miseries included 'London on a Wet Day', 'London on a Foggy Day', 'Crowded Streets', 'Omnibuses', 'Shops', and 'Street Misfortunes' ('Sweeps rush past you, laden with the spoils of smokey chimneys'). **Seymour's Comic Album** (1834) is a collection which included, anonymously, a piece by Dickens; 'The Omnibus' is an excerpt from his 'The Bloomsbury Christening', written for the **Monthly Magazine**. This was accompanied by an illustration (by Robert Seymour, who thus became Dickens's first illustrator) and was the first publication of anything by Dickens in book form. It passed unnoticed in an anthology of similar sketches because writing of this kind was very familiar in 1834.

The following three passages give examples of style. The first is Leigh Hunt, 'A Now: Description of a Hot Day', written in 1820:

*Now blinds are let down, and doors thrown open, and flannel waistcoats left off, and cold meat preferred to hot, and wonder expressed why tea continues so refreshing, and people delight to sliver lettuces into bowls, and apprentices water doorways with tin-canisters that lay several atoms of dust.*¹⁰

I.R. Browning's essay on **Sketches** quotes these lines among others from Leigh Hunt and observes that Dickens imitated 'this technique of a congeries of simple sentences'.¹¹ But others had copied it before him and he might equally have learnt from them. Here is Webbe, in a sketch of 1828:

*Now old ladies, who dare venture a-shopping, go parasolling their withered perfections along. Now dogs go mad, and dowdies go to Margate; and steamboats are full, and dancing on deck is thought vulgar... And now butchers' boys are particularly inveterate against blue-bottles, and have not common patience with common flies. Now cooks suffer a daily martyrdom, and scullion boys have a bitter time of it... Now Aldermen puff and blow like grampusses left aground, and go about the city, at every hundred yards dabbing their foreheads with white handkerchiefs.*¹²

Dickens takes a milder view of a hot spell in London:

*Monday was a fine day, Tuesday was delightful, Wednesday was equal to either, and Thursday was finer than ever; four successive fine days in London! Hackney-Coachmen became revolutionary, and crossing-sweepers began to doubt the existence of a First Cause. The **Morning Herald** informed*

its readers that an old woman in Camden Town had been heard to say that the fineness of the season was 'unprecedented in the memory of the oldest inhabitant'; and Islington clerks, with large families and small salaries, left off their black gaiters, disdained to carry their once green cotton umbrellas, and walked to town in the conspicuous pride of white stockings and cleanly brushed Bluchers.¹³

Dickens is more fluent and sure of his details, in these lines from 'The Bloomsbury Christening', and in dozens of other sketches, than any of his predecessors; but his style is close to that of the others; his clerks in white stockings belong with Webbe's parasolling old ladies, his crossing-sweepers with Webbe's butchers' boys. The reader of 1834 might have sensed Dickens's unique gift for description, but would probably have noticed only an extra competence in a familiar mode. There would have been nothing new, however, in the content or point of view.

It is tempting to look for sources for **Sketches by Boz** in magazine and newspaper sketches in the years before Dickens started work. The second contribution to the **New Monthly's** 'Londoniana', called 'Morning — Evening', may well have influenced Dickens's 'The Streets — Morning' and 'The Streets — Night'. The **New Monthly**, in 1829, observed just those details of early-morning London that Dickens was to use:

The earliest cry is that of the miserable chimney-sweeper, shivering along the chill streets, with an empty stomach, in search of his gloomy employment. No noise of carriages assails the ears. The milkwoman passes with her shrill cry and her sturdy step, her overflowing pails rarely of genuine worth... The domestic servants, half asleep, may be heard at the late hour of eight o'clock, descending the stairs to clean the rooms and kindle the fires; else all within doors is wrapped in curtained stillness.

In the streets, denuded by a busy population, a lofty-laden cart may be seen, dragging along its heavy burthen of garden produce to some of the great markets. Here and there, a straggling, staggering drunkard takes his tortuous course to bed...¹⁴

Dickens notes labourers with the day's dinner tied up in their handkerchiefs, and servants on the steps, the last drunken man staggering home while roaring out the songs of the previous night, and the streets around Covent Garden thronged with carts.¹⁵ These were to be seen every morning; Dickens and the anonymous **New Monthly** writer before him observed from life. Dickens may have been encouraged to write his scenes for the newspapers because he had read such articles as 'Morning — Evening'. He can hardly have believed that the approach in his writing was especially

new.

George Cruikshank, who illustrated **Sketches by Boz**, provides a link with earlier sketch-books. His engravings had appeared in 1833 in a work called **Sunday in London**, by J. Wight. There was controversy during these years about a bill intended to restrict Sunday hours of work and forms of entertainment. Wight's book was in favour of sabbath reform; to establish his case he wrote a series of sketches of low life which are still readable for their close observation:

And in the grey of the Sunday morning, at the sound of the matin bell, the gin temples open wide their portals, while the butchers, and the fishmongers, and the gardeners and the huxters, are spreading out their wares... whilst the rising generation, shoeless and well-ventilated in their little smalls, are sneaking in and out amongst the squalid, gin-soaken crowd, seeking where they may prig their breakfast of rotten apples and raw turnips.

The men leave their wives and mothers to prepare their little bits of dinners for the bakehouse, and then make up the gossiping groups in the neighbourhood, whilst the fathers, sons and daughters stroll forth — some of them with their dogs and a bag, to recreate themselves with a cat-hunt, or a dog-fight, or a man-fight, in the fields; whilst many others repair to the royal park ... to hear the band and see the bold drum major, with gold-laced coat, and glancing cane, strutting before the soldiers as they march to Divine Service, with the band playing 'Drops of Brandy', or 'Go to the Devil and shake yourself'.¹⁶

Wight describes the sabbath labours of cooks, scullions, poulterers, greengrocers, old apple-women and lollipop-mongers. Carriages carry 'the better sort' to church, where beadles drive off those trying to sell apples or lollipops at the door.

Dickens's 'The Streets — Morning' and 'The Streets — Night' are reminiscent of Wight in their choice of details, although sprightlier in the writing. 'The Streets — Morning' tells of the dissipated and disorderly, the wretched and the poor, with something of Wight's tone of aggrieved sorrow. Wight had complained particularly about the milliner girls made to work on Sundays, as well as on every other day of the week. Dickens appealed on their behalf: 'poor girls — the hardest worked, the worst paid, and too often, the worst used class in the community'.¹⁷ His 'Gin Shops', written for the Evening Chronicle in 1835, describes the besotten men, broken-down women, and hungry, ragged, barefoot children mingling with the crowds, about whom Dickens and **Sunday in London** shared a concern. Since Dickens published a pamphlet **Sunday under Three Heads** in 1836, although to oppose the bill which Wight had

supported (it was defeated in the Commons in May 1836), it seem very possible that he read Wight and recognised a fellow-realist on the opposite side of the sabbatarian issue. If so, he would have noticed that the Cruikshank illustration in **Sketches** for his 'Gin Shops' is a near-repeat of a picture done three years earlier for **Sunday in London**. However much Cruikshank shared the general admiration for Boz, he could not have thought that Dickens's originality called for a change of style from him.

Street scenes observed as though by any reader out for a walk were nothing new to those who first enjoyed **Sketches by Boz**; nor sketches of public transport, a favourite Dickens theme. The existence of hackney-coaches was threatened in the 1830s by the growing popularity of the cheaper and safer omnibuses. They still rivalled each other, however, and, together with long-distance coaches, provided a comic theme which can be seen throughout **Sketches** and especially in 'Hackney-Coach Stands', 'Early Coaches', 'Omnibuses', and 'The Last Cab-Driver'. Omnibuses and hackney-coaches ('cabs') careered all over London, a public service and a public menace too. A writer in the **New Monthly**, reflecting on 'Omnibuses and Cabs', complained:

*A foreigner reading our newspapers would suppose that London was visited with an eighth plague; and that we were overrun with omnibuses and cabs... The drivers are said to chuckle over the morning papers which are their gazettes of killed and wounded.*¹⁸

Use of these vehicles was a focal point for communal discontent. There was also a romance about them: 'Cabs whisked about', Dickens wrote, 'with the fare as carefully boxed up behind two glazed calico curtains as any mysterious picture in any one of Mrs Radcliffe's castles; omnibus horses smoked like steam engines'.¹⁹

'It is very generally allowed that public conveyances afford an extensive field for amusement and observation', 'Omnibuses' begins. The conveyances were even more uncomfortable and hazardous than those in London today. **London and all its Miseries** dismissed cabs outright as being an impossible means of transport, and complained about omnibuses:

*These are miserable conveniences! — miserable from the company they contain ... Omnibuses are patronised extensively by thieves — pickpockets, and members of the swell-mob (smartly-dressed gangsters)... In hot weather ... there are only fourteen insides... You therefore stand a good chance of being wedged in between two dainty-fed, rosy cheeked, waddling Cooks.*²⁰

The author offers an 'Omnibusology' of hints: parcels and dogs should not go inside; there are warnings against talking to fellow-passengers, leaning out of the window,

putting feet on the seats, gazing at girls, spitting on the straw, and against showing disdain for those who do some or all of these things: 'Never turn your nose up at your fellow-passengers; but whenever you feel your gorge rising at their humble condition, recollect that they pay the same fare as you do'.²¹ Londoners have not greatly changed. In 'Omnibuses', Dickens concedes these nuisances, but claims that omnibuses are exciting. He describes one typical passenger, a 'testy old man':

*He is very officious in helping people in and out, and always volunteers to give the cad a poke with his umbrella when anyone wants to alight. He usually recommends ladies to have sixpence ready, to prevent delay; and if anybody puts a window down, that he can reach, he immediately puts it up again.*²²

He comes into conflict with the conductor and is worsted:

'What are you stopping for?'
Here the cad whistles, and affects not to hear the question.
'I know you're stopping for passengers; but you've no business to do so. Why are you stopping?'
*'Vy, sir, that's a difficult question. I think it is because we prefer stopping here to going on.'*²³

Dickens admired the independent spirit of the cads, who were well able, then as now, to resist officious passengers who feel that 'something must be done with these fellows, or there's no saying where all this will end'. In many little social comedies of this kind, in **Sketches**, the 'fellows' have the upper hand. Dickens's amused sympathy with cabbies appears again in 'The Last Cab-Driver':

*In the event of contemplating an offer of eightpence, on no account make the tender, or show the money, until you are safely on the pavement. It is very bad policy attempting to save the fourpence. You are very much in the power of a cabman, and he considers it a kind of fee not to do you any wilful damage.*²⁴

Like the writer in the **New Monthly** and the author of **Miseries**, Dickens must have been elaborating on the jokes and anecdotes with which ordinary Londoners, without their own carriages, fortified themselves against the daily inconvenience and irritation involved in getting about town. Two years after **Sketches by Boz**, R.B. Peake's **Snobson's Seasons** (1838) was still able to find fresh amusement in the subject. Some conductors, he explained, imagined that one passenger could ride in two omnibuses at the same time, so keen was the rivalry for custom: 'I have seen a couple of these fellows in the act of tearing a respectable, corpulent lady in half...'.²⁵ Peake

had as good an ear as Boz for Cockney repartee:

'Don't you go in his buss, ma'am; the fleas breed in it.'
'You know your'n was a hearse afore it was an omnibus.'
*'His buss always breaks down, ma'am, just as he comes to the basin of the Regent's canal, and that's the way he waters his osses.'*²⁶

There is no reason to suppose that Peake was imitating **Sketches by Boz**, although he may have been encouraged by the scale of Dickens's success; there were many other models in the periodicals and ephemeral books in the style of Webbe's **Glances at Life**.

Another group of **Boz** sketches presents scenes in and around theatres; Dickens was as attracted by the theatricality of theatre-people off-stage as he was by actors on the stage. In 'Making a Night of It', written for **Bell's Life in London** in 1835, two clerks arrive at the City Theatre, after whisky and cigars. They are 'fast-goers' and so unwelcome in the gallery:

*'Give that dog a bone!' cried one gentleman in his shirt-sleeves. 'Where have you been having half a pint of intermediate beer?' cried a second. 'Tailor!' screamed a third. 'Barber's clerk!' shouted a fourth. 'Throw him O-VER!' roared a fifth... 'Turn them out!' was the general cry. A noise, as of shuffling of feet, and men being knocked up with violence against wainscotting, was heard: a hurried dialogue of 'Comeout!' — 'I won't.' — 'You shall!' — 'I shan't.' 'Give me your card, Sir!' 'You're a scoundrel, Sir!' and so forth, succeeded. A round of applause betokened the approbation of the audience, and Mr. Robert Smithers and Mr. Thomas Potter found themselves shot with astonishing swiftness into the road...'*²⁷

There is a truly Dickensian note in 'a noise, as of... men being knocked up with violence against wainscotting'; the anecdote is deftly managed, especially in the placing and choice of verbs: after the mock-formality of *succeeded* and *betokened* there is a pleasing abruptness in *shot*. The Dickens of **Sketches** is already an artist in prose. It has been suggested that 'Making a Night of It' must have been based on personal experience.²⁸ That may have been so, but there were models in existence for the treatment of scenes like this one, common enough, no doubt, in the theatres of the time. The best is in an early sketch-book, J. Wight's **Mornings at Bow Street** (1824). Wight, like Dickens, was a newspaper reporter; he had covered proceedings at the magistrates court at Bow Street, and **Mornings at Bow Street** is a series of sketches based on that experience, just as Dickens's sketches of magistrates courts were to be

extensions of his reporting for the **Morning Chronicle**. Wight was a far more prissy man than Dickens; his book, he wrote, offered 'specimens of our national humour which is perhaps to be found genuine only in the uncultivated classes of society'.²⁹ But his writing could be lively and close in spirit to Boz. Here he describes a dispute over a vacated theatre seat:

'No, Sir,' replied the round one, very waspishly — 'no, Sir, I shall not! This is my seat — I have satten upon it all the evening and I'll have no other; and let me tell you, Sir, that I think your conduct in taking it, Sir, very ungentlemanly, Sir!' In an instant all was uproar: — 'Turn him out!' — 'Throw them over!' The little fat man lost his balance, fell backwards, and in that position, let fly an immense volley of kicks which the young man received in the stomach. The ladies shrieked, the gentlemen tried to hold his legs down, the house cried 'Shame!' — and at length, after kickings and cuffings, the little round man was delivered over to the peace officers, and conveyed to the watch-house, panting like a porpoise, and perspiring at every pore.³⁰

Mornings at Bow Street was popular, and especially likely to have caught the young Dickens's eye because it was illustrated by Cruikshank. Whether or not he knew this book, or its sequel **More Mornings at Bow Street** (1827), it was from this species of writing that he drew his first ideas of the content and style suitable for newspaper and magazine sketches.

No other sketchist — the word was first used in the sense of 'sketch writer' in 1837 — was so confident or prolific as Boz. The ease with which he produced quantities of work was the first of his powers to show itself. Other writers are modest about their claims to attention; impressions of bus queues and theatre crowds, they fear, are likely to pall. The author of the 1829 'Londoniana' sketches in the **New Monthly** is unsure about how far his subject should be continued:

I fear the reader is by this time heartily tired of a London 'Morning and Evening', but my design is only to catch the general features of things, and not to go into particulars; there is a vast field open, one so large that the labour of a life would not be adequate to view all it contains, much less to describe its infinity of objects.³¹

Dickens had no fear of wearying his readers with more street scenes. The infinite detail which the streets of London offered was to occupy him throughout his career as a novelist, and his realism was always to be nourished by his unusual eye for detail and fascination with city life. But the realism of **Sketches by Boz** is not to be thought of as something completely new. Dickens's first book belongs with a large body of (mostly) ephemeral journalism.

NOTES

1. **Sketches by Boz**, 'The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens' (Oxford, 1957), vi.
2. **The Letters of Charles Dickens**, 'The Pilgrim Edition', edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey, vol. I (Oxford, 1965), 137.
3. The best account is that of I.R. Browning's **Sketches by Boz**, in **Dickens and the Twentieth Century**, ed J. Gross and G. Pearson (London, 1962).
4. **Evening Chronicle**, London, 31 January 1835.
5. **Sketches by Boz**, 82.
6. **Sketches by Boz**, 82.
7. **Sketches by Boz**, 83.
8. Cornelius Webbe, **Glances at Life in City and Suburb** (London, 1836), vol. I, 147-8.
9. 'The Streets', **New Monthly Magazine**, vol. XXVI (London, 1829), 68.
10. **Indicator**, vol. I (London, 1820), 301.
11. **Dickens and the Twentieth Century**, 23.
12. Cornelius Webbe, **The Posthumous Papers, Facetious and Fanciful, Of a Person Lately About Town** (London, 1828), 274-5.
13. **Sketches by Boz**, 471.
14. **New Monthly**, vol. XXVI, 157-8.
15. **Sketches by Boz**, 48.
16. J. Wight, **Sunday in London** (London, 1833), 17-18.
17. **Sketches by Boz**, 51.
18. **New Monthly**, vol. XXXV (1832), 572-3.
19. **Sketches by Boz**, 471.2.
20. **Kidd's London Directory**, (London, 1837), 10.

21. **Directory**, 11.
22. **Sketches by Boz**, 140.
23. **Sketches by Boz**, 140.
24. **Sketches by Boz**, 143.
25. R.B. Peake, **Snobson's Seasons: With Illustrations by Robert Seymour** (London, 1838), 48.
26. Peake, op. cit. 48.
27. **Sketches by Boz**, 269-70.
28. **Charles Dickens: 1812-1870**, edited by W.F. Tomlin (London, 1969), 64.
29. J. Wight, **Mornings at Bow Street**, (London, 1824), iv.
30. **Mornings**, 14-15.
31. **New Monthly**, vol. XXVI, 162.