

## **EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES: 1836 to 1849: MISCELLANIES AND THE *DAILY NEWS***

It was the success of *Sketches by Boz* which tempted Dickens away from *The Morning Chronicle* in November 1836 to become editor of **Bentley's *Miscellany***: Richard Bentley wanted to exploit the name 'Boz'. Although it provided Dickens with a place to publish his novel *Oliver Twist* he never felt he had adequate editorial control ('It was always Bentley's.. never mine' he wrote), resigning from it in 1839 after numerous disagreements, calling Bentley 'the Burlington Street Brigand'.

*Nicholas Nickleby* had completed its serial run in October 1839 and at that stage Dickens was contemplating once more using a weekly miscellany framework for his next publication. He was much attracted to this model as a result of his reading of and enthusiasm for eighteenth-century periodical publications like the *Spectator*, the *Tatler* and Goldsmith's *Bee*, which he had read in childhood. He persuaded his publishers, Chapman and Hall, to undertake this new venture, sharing in the profits, maintaining his relationship with the public, but since other contributors were to be involved, not needing to be responsible for the whole work. It was to be called ***Master Humphrey's Clock*** and was used to publish the *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*: once again, the format was unsuccessful.

The basic premise of *Master Humphrey's Clock* was the existence of an elderly, infirm, gentleman called Master Humphrey who gathered around him a group of friends who would entertain one another with reading stories, which were kept and then taken out of a long-case clock. The stories were to enable Dickens to reintroduce some of the characters from his earlier works who had caught the popular imagination: Pickwick, Sam Weller and Sam Weller's father the old coachman Tony Weller. There was also to be material of an historical kind, mainly stories about London, like the stories of the giants Gog and Magog; there would be travel material; there would be stories about Master Humphrey himself as he explored London.

The first issue of the magazine appeared in April 1840 with sketches and short stories and at weekly intervals thereafter, priced at threepence an issue. The first one sold well with 70,000 issues and Dickens was delighted, writing 'The *Clock* goes gloriously indeed!' What was to become *The Old Curiosity Shop* first appeared in the fourth number of the journal but, when

readers discovered the magazine did not contain, nor was planned to contain, a new novel by Dickens, sales quickly fell away.

Gradually the Master Humphrey material was withdrawn and from the twelfth weekly issue all space was given over to *The Old Curiosity Shop* which continued to run on its own until the final chapter appeared in the 45<sup>th</sup> issue in February 1841. It was at the end of the third chapter that the Master Humphrey narrator figure was removed: and the narrative carried on in Dickens's own third-person narrative voice. When this novel reached its end, Dickens had illustrations included marking that and heralding its successor, *Barnaby Rudge*, which ran from 13 February to 14 December 1841, after which the *Clock* ended.

During the rest of this period he was writing for the radical weekly paper *The Examiner*, which was sub-edited and later edited by his friend John Forster. He wrote over forty articles for the paper, mainly in the years 1837 to 1843 and 1848 to 1849, revealing commitment to liberal reform, expressing aesthetic opinions through theatre reviews, and taking up social issues. But he was never other than an occasional – if powerful – contributor and wanted to be more of a direct influence on opinion.

He attempted this by means of editorship of the newly-created 'Morning Newspaper of Liberal Politics and thorough Independence', the *Daily News*, which launched on 21 January 1846. It was a post which he relinquished very quickly, after seventeen days. Dickens did not have, at that point, the skill or experience to manage the editorial routines involved in running a daily newspaper. William Howard Russell, famous for his reporting of the Crimean War, later wrote that Dickens was 'the best *reporter* in London' but not good as a journalist because he lacked experience and knowledge.