

**The Uncommercial
Traveller**

Charles Dickens

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No landlord is my friend and brother, no chambermaid loves me, no waiter worships me, no boots admires and envies me. No round of beef or tongue or ham is expressly cooked for me, no pigeon-pie is especially made for me, no hotel-advertisement is personally addressed to me, no hotel-room tapestried with great-coats and railway wrappers is set apart for me, no house of public entertainment in the United Kingdom greatly cares for my opinion of its brandy or sherry.

The Uncommercial Traveller Details

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From Reader Review *The Uncommercial Traveller* for online ebook

James says

A rather odd eclectic set of short stories based on a travellers experience. Based in Dickens' other novels, I expected a lot more from this. In many parts rather disjointed. Some works though, very vivid. His description of the Lead Mills, rather similar to stories by H G Wells, such as 'The Vone' and 'Lord of the Dynamo's'.

This would be a very good book as a way of introduction to themes, trends and ideas in his other major works such as *Little Dorrit* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Very nice to hear further reference to the Temperance Movement. In part, I feel he tried to do a philosophical satire if what it means to be British, but, unlike George Orwell (*England this England*) and Bill Bryson (*Notes from a small island*) he doesn't achieve what he sets out to do.

Russell Bittner says

For Dickens—the social engineer—perhaps no essay in this collection comes closer to illustrating his compassion for, and personal (because once lived) understanding of, the plight of the child-pauper than XXI “The Short Timers” (pp. 205-215). It’s a truth as timeless as any I know, and I heard a modern-day rendition of it just the other day from a woman who leads children’s tours in the Discovery Garden of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Those who start out with the least in life are generally the most grateful and reverential when a gift, however modest, falls into their hands.

For the joys of traveling, lodging and dining in the England of Dickens’s time, “Refreshments for Travellers” (pp. 52 – 60) is, itself, a joy to read.

To get a sense of the immense “rewards” reaped by British soldiers fighting colonialist battles abroad, read “The Great Tasmania’s Cargo” (pp. 74 – 82).

Thomas Wolfe once wrote a novel titled *You Can’t Go Home Again*. Although it’s just one chapter in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, “Dullborough Town” (pp. 116 – 125) comes closest to Wolfe’s *opus*—or at least to my memory of a book I read over forty years ago.

Rarely would I cite a footnote in a review such as this one. That said, this particular footnote (I feel) bears citation. In the essay titled “Chambers” in which Dickens sheds some “ghostly” light on one of his first jobs, we get an even keener sense of Dickens’s rather acerbic sense of humor in reading an end-of-text footnote (on p. 376) in explanation of the use of Dickens’s “Resurrection Man”: “a ‘resurrection man’ is a body snatcher, or a person who illegally exhumes bodies in order to sell them to anatomists (OED). Dickens once gave out a calling card with ‘Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist – in search of a subject’ on it, as if to suggest, in a grimly humorous way, a parallel with his vocation as a writer.”

For a typically Dickensian (i.e., exquisitely written; moving; humane) non-fiction story, I recommend Chapter XVII (“The Italian Prisoner”), pp. 168 – 177.

If you’re accustomed to thinking of London as a regal metropolis, Dickens takes another (and much dimmer)

view of the city. In XXV (“The Boiled Beef of New England”), pp. 245-253, we read the following: “(t)he shabbiness of our English capital, as compared with Paris, Bordeaux, Frankfort, Milan, Geneva—almost any important town on the continent of Europe—I find very striking after an absence of any duration in foreign parts. London is shabby in contrast with New York, with Boston, with Philadelphia. In detail, I would say it can rarely fail to be a disappointing piece of shabbiness, to a stranger from any of those places. There is nothing shabbier than Drury-lane, in Rome itself. The meanness of Regent-street, set against the great line of Boulevarts (*sic!*) in Paris, is as striking as the abortive ugliness of Trafalgar-square, set against the gallant beauty of the Place de la Concorde. London is shabby by daylight, and shabbier by gaslight. No Englishman knows what gaslight is, until he sees the Rue de Rivoli and the Palais Royal after dark.”

Note: I suspect—much like English cuisine these days—that Dickens’s view of London in this passage is at least as dated as his use of the word “boulevard” for “boulevart.” Both the cuisine and the city itself have come a long way in the last 147 years. And as regards his comment about New York (I can’t speak with any kind of real authority about either Boston or Philadelphia, inasmuch as I don’t know the seedier parts of those two cities), I think he should’ve looked a bit more critically behind the curtain.

Additional note: the rest of this same essay is an excellent illustration of Dickens’s unquestioned respect for the English working class, even if his “respect” for the class of which he is unquestionably a part is rather less than enthusiastic. Dickens—we can readily see in this essay—was no high-handed moralist.

If Dickens shows genuine commiseration with the working class, he shows anything *but* with the criminal and parasitical elements of his day—the elements then referred to as “roughs,” but which have earned the more recent sobriquet of “hooligans.” For the evidence, see Chapter XXX (“The Ruffian”), pp. 295-301.

If I’ve awarded only four stars to this work, it is not because the work falls short of even the twinkle of a fifth star—but rather because Dickens’s fiction is so one-of-a-kind. The prose in this work of non-fiction shines just as brightly, but it doesn’t move or entertain in quite the same way.

Would I recommend *The Uncommercial Traveller* to anyone but a Dickens scholar? Quite honestly, no. Most of the material is dated—and Dickens’s syntax is, well, Dickensian. Even the most sedulous of readers has more of literary merit at his or her present command than one life will allow.

RRB

02/05/16

Brooklyn, NY

Tom says

Another grand work of Dickens's. This time a collection of separately published pieces formed as part of his own journal "All the Year Round". The character of the Uncommercial Traveller takes readers along a journey from Great Britain, through Europe and to America. As ever, the tone is delicately brightened by Dickens's humorous approach though there are some truly poignant moments when we are taken on a tour of the Workhouses, the docks of both Liverpool and London and those people struggling to make ends meet in the darkness of the mid 19th century.

A collection well worth reading with a consistent quality throughout the vast majority of these diverse snippets of Victorian life.

Katie Lumsden says

I don't think Dickens's non-fiction ages as well as his fiction. I enjoyed this, but a lot if it went over my head and wasn't completely engaging.

M. Walker says

Something of a slog. Journalism doesn't always age well, even when it's by one of the greats. Many of the stories in the Reprinted Pieces are a treat, though. If I really include the "date started" to "date finished" range I think it would be more than a decade.

Todd Stockslager says

Review Title: Fiction or journalism?

In the second half of his short brilliant career Dickens returned to the short sketch style that made his first fame in the literary world as "Boz". The 37 pieces here were written in three separate periods—1860, 1863, 1868/69—when his personal and professional life had radically changed, and when his pace of writing longer fiction serially had slowed down. The results are good, if uneven, but always recognizably Dickens.

By 1860 Dickens was separated from wife Catharine and his affair with Ellen Ternan was in full swing. He had become a restless and almost obsessive traveler, trying to find a place to settle his mind or at least mask his guilty conscience. He would soon have the idea of the readings from his books which combined that frantic travel with his drive to earn increasing amounts of money to fund his and his large extended family's profligate habits. So here he writes in the guise of the "uncommercial" traveler, who works for no one but the firm of "Human Interest Brothers," in contrast to the growing community of business travelers (salesmen, professionals, and upper middle class business men) who rode the expanding rail network from place to place.

Published originally in his monthly serial journals before being collected, the pieces are aimed straight at the heart of his target audience: travelogues of London, poignant humor highlighting the plight of the poor, pointed humor driving at the heartlessness of the government. Most pieces are a blend of all three. Editor Daniel Tyler provides footnotes for topical and literary references, and also documents the (mostly very minor) textual differences between the pieces as originally published and as later collected for book publication.

By 1868/69, when the last pieces were written, Dickens's time and energy were consumed by the reading tours that killed him just a year after the last of the pieces was published. I found these last few some of the least successful in the collection. Especially cloying is number XXXII, "A Small Star in the East," when during a ramble through a very poor section of East London he describes knocking on doors of random poor people's flats and writing about their straitened conditions. Yes, he was the famous Charles Dickens, known for his sympathy for and with the working poor, and would have likely been known by them. But at this point of his life one day's earnings from his many profitable ventures could have sustained one of these needy

families for a year. And he doesn't name names, but surely there was an underlying tension between being visited by the famous Inimitable, and the humiliation of being an exemplar of grinding poverty.

But by this stage in his career Dickens had so refined his craft that he could (seemingly effortlessly, although if you read his letters you learn the toll such effort took on his mental and physical health) turn his keen eye for observation of people, places, and dialogue into a seamless blend of journalism, essay, fiction, and poetic description. Which makes me wonder if he really did so brazenly invite himself in to these poor hovels, or was this an example of the fertile writer at work? Is this journalism or fiction, a question without a verifiable answer, which makes it unquestionably art, and Inimitably Dickens.

Kate says

"Reprinted Pieces" was the better of two uninspiring volumes, because it included some fiction. The non-fiction was, for the most part, dull and/or overwrought.

Sammy says

Clocking in at the end of Dickens' 24 major works, *The Uncommercial Traveller* is a series of his sketches, primarily non-fiction, that were published throughout the 1860s, the last decade of his life. It's quite fitting, given that *Sketches by Boz* was the work that first established his popularity, however whereas that one included more tales of sentimentalism or mystery, this is basically entirely sketches of life, and what it's like to live in England during this decade. I have to say, I find this rather wonderful. The pieces are of their age and written by an older person of the time, so they're often confused about things that I'm sure made plenty of sense to the younger generation! But they're also wonderful examples of Dickens' vivid eye for detail, and smart mixtures of social insight with character details. Whether it's anthropomorphising neighbourhood dogs, dryly theorising on bad restaurants for travellers, moralising on how returned soldiers are treated, or pondering the encroachment of modernity on everyday life, the author is a captivating cataloguer of his era. This is probably more for Dickens completists than casual readers, but it's a truly interesting social document.

Timothy Ferguson says

This is a series of magazine articles, I assume, as they are short pieces and he specialized in that form. They purport to be his reminiscences on minor events he has seen while traveling, although their veracity is impossible to confirm. They tend toward his usual themes, poverty, the suffering of the hidden underclass, the way terrible things happen just out of sight in Victorian England.

I thought that to the Victorian English, rural life was something of an idyll, but Dickens seems to suggest that rural life is basically part of the "just out of sight", which is far more dystopian and disturbing than I thought was common in the era. Not to put too much weight on a parallel, I thought the Victorian view was basically like the opening ceremony of the Olympics. They thought the peasants had happy lives playing with apples, and that things were only really grimy and horrible in the cities. Not so, in Dickens. Basically there's a centre of art and culture and light and everything about it seems to be terribly bleak: indeed the bleakness seems to be the price of the light.

I found its lack of mangled, saintly children refreshing. I found the second chapter, which was about the shipwreck of the Royal Charter, genuinely touching. The chapter which repeats the stories which were told to him by his nurse, and recounts his terror at them, is incredibly personal and genuinely seems like a record of what we would consider his repeated emotional abuse. At the time, of course it would not be considered harmful – Dickens himself seems to see them as the genesis of his career as a writer of Christmas ghost stories.

Originally reviewed on book coasters

Alan says

Delightful--and pertinent a century and a half later. Who knew the Victorians ate so well, even in an abandoned Inn (the Railroad had circumvented this old coach-house): "The stopperless cruets on the spindle-shanked sideboard were in a miserably dejected state: the anchovy sauce having turned blue some years ago, and the cayenne pepper (with a scoop in it like a small model of a wooden leg) having turned solid." Not politically correct, because of his use of the French "sauvage", still CD is hilarious on funeral customs in a chapter titled French Funerals: "The waste for which the funeral customs of many tribes of savages are conspicuous, has attended these civilised obsequies; and once, and twice, have I wished in my soul that if the waste must be, they would let the undertaker bury the money, and let me bury the friend."

The most telling piece this time through is "Medicine Men of Civilization," a fine cross-cultural analysis, and satire which shines a spotlight on our recent American presidential election (Romney-Obama) and on the petrified Congress (in the stony wooden scale): "It is a widely diffused custom among savage tribes, when they meet to discuss any affair of public importance, to sit up all night making horrible noise, dancing, blowing shells, and (in cases where they are familiar with fire-arms) flying out into open spaces and letting off guns. Our legislative assemblies might take a hint from this.... The uselessness of arguing with any supporter of a Government or an Opposition, is well known. Try dancing. It is better exercise, and has the unspeakable recommendation that it couldn't be reported....A council of six hundred savage gentlemen entirely independent of tailors, sitting on their hams in a ring, and occasionally grunting, seem to me, according to my travels, somehow to do what they come together for; whereas that is not at all the general experience of six hundred civilised gentlemen very dependent on tailors and sitting on mechanical contrivances."

Ian Russell says

A collection of articles, essays and reports, written in the later part of Dickens' life for a publication, a kind of serial magazine he had founded, form a kind of journal which now reads not unlike a blog.

These writings have no theme other than Dickens' observations on contemporary life. There are accounts of a shipwreck and local heroes; his night-walking cures for insomnia; visits to a London workhouse; an emigrant ship transporting Mormons to America; his dull town of birth; lawyers; tramps; nurses; pubs; mortuaries; graveyards; railway food; sea-sickness; travelling abroad; and a view inside London's deserted churches. They range from the serious, profound, and touching to the whimsical, humorous, and anecdotal. He rambles digressively at times and at others, I found him a little incomprehensible, but just as I might following any modern day blogger. I wonder what he would have made of Wordpress etc.

Though I will admit to skimming over a few paragraphs through tedium, I'm glad I read *Uncommercial Traveller*. On the whole, it's interesting, historically, and entertaining and, obviously, Dickens knew how to write! Btw, it's free to download from various web sources.

Fiona says

I know some will be appalled that I can give Dickens only 3 stars. I wanted to read these pieces as I believed them to be semi-autobiographical journalism. I was interested to read about workhouses, almshouses, the life of the 19th century London poor in general. All you have to do is Google up a couple of the places mentioned to find that they don't exist but that Dickens 'probably' based them on some other place. Journalism then becomes fiction because what do fiction writers often do but write fictionalised accounts of familiar places? I found some of them quite self indulgent but then he was printing them in his own publication so could produce what he wanted. They were also written in competition with Thackeray's contributions to his own publication so there was literally a war of words going on. I didn't read every article but dare say I might dip in again occasionally. Overall, I'm quite disappointed though.

H.Friedmann says

At last at last! This was a bit of a slog, and I'm glad to be done. Warning to other readers - do not read Dickens' short stories and essays in compilation form. Choose one at a time, read and enjoy, maybe use them for study. But 700+ pages in a row....don't do it to yourself. To be sure the stories and essays contained within the *Uncommercial Traveller* and *Reprinting Pieces* are explorations of the Victorian World that can still be seen as relevant today, or provide insight into his novels. They should not be shoved lightly aside, but they should be taken in small doses for greater appreciation.

Spiros says

Phew, what a slog: this is definitely some high-fiber prose.

This collection of Dickens' later magazine articles, as well as some reprinted earlier works which The Inimitable curated himself, tested my endurance. The pieces are all worthwhile, and many are brilliant: it's just that there are so damn many of them, and they are all so dense. In many of the riverside articles, and the stories set amongst the poor, one can discern the genesis of much of works such as *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Hard Times*, and especially *Our Mutual Friend*. "Holiday Romance", a series of tales told in the voices of wildly imaginative children, felt a lot like the work of Spike Milligan. And "The Noble Savage" was rather toe-curlingly racist.

Throughout these articles, I couldn't help feel that "The New Journalism" had pretty much been an invention of Charles Dickens.

Heather says

The 37 pieces in this book were written in the 1860s, published in a weekly magazine/journal that Dickens ran, and later collected and printed in book form. They range fairly widely in theme and tone, but as Daniel

Tyler argues in his introduction to the edition I read, they can be seen to make up "a volume-length consideration of how far (and to whom) sympathy can be extended" (xix). (In one essay I liked a lot, Dickens visits a boat about to depart England with hundreds of emigrating Mormons on board: he clearly isn't expecting to be particularly charmed by them, but clearly is.) Some pieces were moving, some interesting, some funny, others kind of a slog—I wonder if I might have liked this more if I'd taken breaks from it, but it was a library book, so I didn't.

Not surprisingly, I really liked the essays/parts of essays featuring descriptive passages about London, like this, from "Wapping Workhouse":

Pleasantly wallowing in the abundant mud of that thoroughfare, and greatly enjoying the huge piles of building belonging to the sugar refiners, the little masts and vanes in small back gardens in back streets, the neighbouring canals and docks, the India-vans lumbering along their stone tramway, and the pawnbrokers' shops where hard-up Mates had pawned so many sextants and quadrants, that I should have bought a few cheap if I had the least notion how to use them, I at last began to file off to the right, towards Wapping. (19)

Or this, from "City of London Churches":

Whether I think of the church where the sails of the oyster-boats in the river almost flapped against the windows, or of the church where the railroad made the bells hum as the train rushed by above the roof, I recal a curious experience. (92)

Other high points included a really good outraged essay about the poor treatment of soldiers ("The Great Tasmania's Cargo"), a piece about being very seasick crossing to Calais ("The Calais Night Mail"), a piece about stories remembered from childhood, including stories that were terrifying at the time ("Nurse's Stories"), and a piece about walking in normally busy parts of London that become quiet on summer weekends ("The City of the Absent").
