

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the lyceum movement in the United States began to evolve from its origins as a platform for education and self-improvement to a vehicle for public entertainment. In the movement's early stages, scientific lectures and debates, designed to 'educate and agitate', were the predominant subjects of lyceum programmes, but these gradually diminished as the American public clamoured for more entertaining pursuits.

There was no international copyright law to restrain the publication of popular fiction. American publishers habitually pirated the works of British authors, making them readily available to their readers. Thus the American public was well acquainted with the works of such popular writers as Dickens, Thackeray and Wilkie Collins and provided a ready audience for well-known authors who came to America.

In addition, improvements in transportation from the 1840s onwards enabled easier and more comfortable travel. Trans-Atlantic steamships made the trip to the United States feasible, and the expansion of the North American railroad system allowed for the possibility of one-night performances.¹

In 1842, Charles Dickens made his first journey to the United States, receiving a hero's welcome. He dined with President John Tyler, attended sessions of Congress and was fêted everywhere he went. In spite of his open denigration of American customs and manners, and his criticism of international copyright issues, American readers flocked to see the charismatic author of the books they loved. They were not disappointed. Dickens's appeal led one reviewer to declare,

He does not only *read* his story; he *acts* it. Each character ... is as completely assumed and individualized ... as though he was personating it in costume on the stage.²

After Dickens's first visit to the United States, Thackeray made his own journey. Thackeray saw that there was money to be made and determined that a lecture tour in America could provide an opportunity for financial security for his two daughters. He made two lecture tours in the 1850s: one in 1852–3 at the invitation of James T. Fields, and again in 1855–6 when he presented a series of

lectures on the Hanoverian kings. The first tour was a personal and financial success, but the second was less so because of ill health and a negative press.³ Nevertheless, he was able to carry home more than £9,500 from the two tours. In addition, he met with President Millard Fillmore and attended balls and other events in his honour. George Curtis summed up Thackeray's reception:

Those who knew his books found the author in the lecturer. Those who did not know his books were charmed in the lecturer by what is charming in the author – the unaffected humanity, the tenderness, the sweetness, the genial play of fancy, and the sad touch of truth, with that glancing stroke of satire which, lightning-like, illumines while it withers.

Curtis continued:

The lectures were even more delightful than the books, because the tone of the voice and the appearance of the man, the general personal magnetism, explained and alleviated so much that would otherwise have seemed doubtful or unfair.⁴

When Dickens returned to America in 1867–8 to conduct his own reading tour, Charles Eliot Norton wrote, 'No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend.'⁵ Indeed, hundreds of thousands of 'friends' had the opportunity to hear him read. In addition to earning the adulation of an entire continent, Dickens made a vast sum of money. Although he distrusted the American currency and insisted that the proceeds of his readings be converted to gold at a rate that cost him almost forty per cent, he netted almost £19,000.⁶

Taking inspiration from the successes of Dickens and Thackeray, many British celebrities undertook the challenge of an Atlantic crossing to seek the experience – and the fortune – promised by a tour in America. They returned home, eagerly sharing stories of what they had seen – and what they had earned.

By the 1850s, well-known American lecturers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher and the abolitionist Wendell Phillips were not only inspiring their audiences, but also entertaining them with their impressive rhetoric. As the American public flocked to these programmes, promoters, operating through lecture bureaus, saw an opportunity for commercial success.⁷ Lyceum tours became increasingly lucrative for both lecturer and promoter, and the bureaus actively pursued celebrities from both sides of the Atlantic. The bureau managers would make arrangements for an itinerary by scheduling productions, securing venues, and determining admission fees.

During the 1873 season that Wilkie Collins was in America, scores of English personalities were scheduled to lecture in the United States. They included Charles Bradlaugh, the notorious 'English Republican'; astronomer Richard Proctor; Gerald Massey, poet and Egyptologist; illusionist John Henry Pepper;

historian and traveller Hepworth Dixon and Mrs Scott Siddons, a Shakespearian orator.⁸

An editorial in the *Toronto Daily Globe* of that time explained the phenomenon:

Since Mr. Dickens found his Golconda⁹ in America, there has been an increasing tendency to bring every English celebrity, or even mere notorieties, across the Atlantic ... America is the paradise of the lecturer. Lecturing, an exotic in England, and but partially successful, is an indigenous plant in America, carefully cultivated and adequately remunerated. Therefore, any Englishman who thinks he has the power to interest an audience for a couple of hours, may very fairly take an opportunity of seeing the United States, and making money at the same time.¹⁰

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