

Popular History in a Popular Medium: A Case Study of Household Words

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Historical Consciousness and Popular History in the Nineteenth Century

In the early twenty-first century, we live in a present almost obsessed with the past: We celebrate one anniversary after another; we consume 'retro' clothes, cars, furniture and music. History comes to us in a wide range of media: on television (in documentaries, docudramas, quiz and re-enactment shows), in the cinema, in historical novels and period crime fiction, in science magazines and comic history books. We view material history in attractive museums and exhibition 'events,' buy replicas in museum shops and join historical city walks. Those who want to actively 'play' (with) history can choose from battle re-enactments, 'medieval' events (from banquets to markets), Live Action Role Plays as well as board and computer games. Last but not least, the Internet provides us with wikis, forums and websites for every historical need, including research into one's own genealogy. This intense interest in the past, including the markets it has created, is not easy to explain, but it has been identified as a reaction to accelerated modernisation and resulting quests for identity.¹ However, the contemporary high of historical interest is not unprecedented. Stephen Bann speaks of the notable "generosity of the nineteenth-century Clio" and points out a "wide variety of representational forms which were utilised throughout this period to express a new vision of the past" (1-2). Since around 1800, a "historical culture"² developed which displayed a markedly 'popular' orientation in two meanings of the word: It was addressed to a wide audience spanning all classes, age groups and sexes, and it was presented in manners accessible for and appealing to such audiences. As Rosemary Mitchell explains:

A sense of loss and discontinuity with the past fed a historical curiosity unprecedented in the history of the Western world. The causes of this sense of dislocation are complex, endlessly debatable, and vary from country to country, class to class, person to person. However, such cataclysmic political events as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars and such more gradual changes as the emergence of a consumer society and the beginnings of industrialization clearly contributed. Most historiographers and cultural historians believe this new historical culture to be rooted in the contemporary cultural movement known as Romanticism [...]. Clearly, the demand for empathic understanding and the fascination with the visible relics of the past – whether architectural and archaeological, or literary, or pictorial – which characterize this new historical awareness link it to Romantic philosophies. So, too does a democratic attention to the lives of the common people and other social, religious, and cultural groups generally marginalized by earlier historical writers and painters. (2)

¹ For current research into the popularity of history cf. Korte and Paetschek, *Popular History* and "Historical Edutainment"; for a survey of the manifestations of popular and public history in contemporary British culture, cf. De Groot.

² For a definition of (English) "historical culture" cf. Melman 4: "the productions of segments of the past, or rather pasts, the multiplicity of their representations, and the myriad ways in which the English – as individuals and in groups – looked at this past (sometimes in the most literal sense of 'looking') and made use of it, or did not, both in a social and material world and in their imaginary".

If the Romantics ‘discovered’ history, for instance through the immensely popular historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, the Victorians were already *immersed* in the past in a manner comparable to our days. Leslie Howsam points out that “[i]n the mid- and late-Victorian decades, British people began to learn about the past from a remarkably young age and throughout their lives” (55). Victorian children grew up with history books such as Mrs Markham’s [Elizabeth Penrose’s] *History of England* (1823), which went through many editions, and Lady Callcott’s *Little Arthur’s History of England*, originally published in 1835 and likewise reissued throughout the century. The adult Victorian came across history not only in all formats of a flourishing print culture (more about which below), but also in the many kinds of ‘shows’ and entertainments that this culture offered: museums and exhibitions, the stage, visual spectacles such as panoramas and dioramas, or large-scale historical paintings.³ The historical also surrounded Queen Victoria’s subjects in the form of architecture and interior decoration: neo-Gothic buildings (such as the re-built Houses of Parliament) and other medievalisms, or manifestations of Egyptomania, which became a craze in Britain following Giovanni Belzoni’s London exhibition of Egyptian relics in 1821. With the facilitation of travel, the Victorians developed a taste for visiting historical sites not only at home, but also increasingly abroad. And it should not be forgotten that the past was now much ‘deeper’ than in previous centuries since the emerging disciplines of palaeontology and archaeology opened vistas of time formerly unimaginable (cf. Korte, “Archäologie”) and sparked a fashion for fossil-hunting on the English coast.

How did Victorian intellectuals and the wider public make sense of the past that so conspicuously enveloped them? It has been pointed out that there was no single, dominant historical narrative but an assemblage of competing views of the past; different periods and their protagonists were interpreted in different ways. Nevertheless, a number of leitmotifs can be discerned, especially where history was considered in terms of the nation: an emphasis on Protestant themes, on liberty and a ‘Whig’ narrative that saw the nation in ascendant development since the constitutional agreement achieved in the Glorious Revolution (cf. Mitchell 8-13). Not unsurprisingly for a country that perceived itself in the van of technological and economic advancement, there was also a belief in the ‘progress’ of civilisation. This did not imply, however, that Victorians viewed the past favourably. Rather, to the Victorians “history was neither a confident place nor particularly comfortable or cosy. It was a place of danger, disorder, and degrees of violence” (Melman 11). And there was evidence that even great civilisations had not survived. Taking up a vision articulated by the period’s most influential historian, Thomas Macaulay, the book *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872), co-produced by the writer William Blanchard Jerrold and the artist Gustave Doré, ended with a plate projecting the mighty British capital in ruins in a far future. Such ambivalence in the response to the past is also apparent in one of the most popular media of Victorian times, the family magazine.

The Family Magazine in Victorian Historical Culture

Victorian print culture proffered a wide range of products for readers seeking knowledge about and entertainment through history, archaeology and palaeontology. Books were still expensive, but to the middle classes at least they were also accessible through a system of commercial and

³ The variety of these shows and forms of entertainment has been impressively documented in Altick’s pioneering study *The Shows of London*. On historical stage melodrama cf. Melman 114-19, who also comments on history as a subject for panoramas, “especially that of the recent past still alive in collective memory [...]. Military campaigns of the Continental Wars, naval battles, and colonial wars drew patriotic crowds and were at one and the same time visual histories and documentary surveys [...]” (75). On Victorian historical painting see Strong, who refers to the period 1840 to 1870 as “the great age of history painting” (42).

later also public libraries.⁴ The print market provided magisterial – and yet best-selling – historiography such as Macaulay's *History of England* (1849 and 1855), but also cheap publications for the education of the masses such as Charles Knight's *Pictorial History of England* (1837-1839) which, like Knight's later *Popular History of England* (1856-1862), was originally published in collectable issues.⁵ There were also historical novels galore, many of which were highly popular and achieved high sales figures.⁶ Much historical fiction first appeared in serialised form in magazines, which were, arguably, the most significant part of the Victorian revolution of the print market and the foremost site for reaching a truly popular audience. Robert Altick notes in his authoritative study about the emergence of the English common reader:

Great as was the increase in book production between 1800 and 1900, the expansion of the periodical industry was greater still. This was only natural, for of all forms of reading matter, periodicals – including newspapers – are best adapted for the needs of a mass audience. They can be produced and sold much more cheaply than books. They appeal to the millions of men and women who consider the reading of a whole book too formidable a task even to be attempted. (318)

One might claim that magazines were the television of their day, offering information and entertainment, covering many diverse topics and making use of a wide range of genres, both factual and fictional. The magazine market exploded in the second half of the nineteenth century, generating a vast number of publications for different segments of the reading audience. Affordable magazines for family reading were a major segment of this market. Some served religious and utilitarian purposes (such as the magazines published by the Religious Tract Society or the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge); others were more openly dedicated to entertainment as well as general information.

Although much material in the magazines was concerned with the present and the readers' contemporary world, a significant portion of pieces was devoted to the past. It would be presumptuous to even attempt a survey of the presentation of history in 'the' Victorian magazine. Not only was there a proliferation of magazines, each magazine also had its specific agenda and hence outlook on history. My discussion will therefore focus on one case study only:⁷ the presentation of history (and prehistory) in a highly popular mid-Victorian magazine, *Household Words* (1850-1859), which was edited by one of the most popular writers of his time,

⁴ Figures given for Mudie's lending library attest the significant share of historical material on its shelves: "In the ten years 1853-62 he added to his stock about 960,000 volumes, almost half of which (416,706) were novels; works of history and biography accounted for 215,743 more" (Altick, *The English Common Reader* 296).

⁵ Charles Knight (1791-1873) was a writer and a prolific publisher for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. He played a major role in the popularisation of knowledge in Victorian England and the education of the working classes. His publications for the Society included the *Penny Magazine* (launched in 1832) and the *Penny Cyclopaedia* (also originally published in weekly parts). His *Popular History* was, as Mitchell notes, "intended to be the history of a society becoming ever more united in the pursuit of progress and improved social conditions, in an atmosphere of increasing economic and political freedom. It was an ambitious attempt at the history of the making of a national community and a nation-state" (139).

⁶ William Harrison Ainsworth (1805-1882), for instance, wrote almost forty successful novels, some set around historical landmarks such as *The Tower of London* (1839-1840), *Old St Paul's* (1841) and *Windsor Castle* (1843), while others focused on historical figures such as the notorious criminal *Jack Sheppard* (1839).

⁷ For an in-depth investigation of history in *The Leisure Hour* see Lechner. This study, like the present article, is a result of a research project whose material is available via the Popular History in Victorian Magazines database (Korte and Lechner).

Charles Dickens.⁸ Dickens, with his infallible instinct for the market and the tastes of his contemporaries, involved himself in the blooming magazine market from early in his career until his death in 1870,⁹ most notably with the editing of *Household Words* and its continuation, *All the Year Round*. With its miscellany of "Instruction and Entertainment," *Household Words* was, quite typically of Dickens, strongly committed to urgent social issues of the time, and the "Preliminary Word" to the first issue (30 March 1850) expressed Dickens's hope that the social evils exposed in the magazine's pages should not "render any of us [...] less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time" (1). While the magazine's focus was thus strongly on the present and the future to which it might lead, Dickens's instinct for popular interests explains why history was also explicitly announced as part of its programme: "Our Household Words will not be echoes of the present time alone, but of the past too."

Household Words and Its Historical Interests

Household Words was a weekly publication sold at two pennies per issue; an issue normally had 24 pages printed in double columns, without illustrations, and featured 6 to 7 full-length pieces.¹⁰ Its price made the individual issue affordable to families with a lower income, but the magazine also came out in more costly monthly editions with wrappers, as well as biannual editions for the private, the commercial and the public library. This publication policy indicates that Dickens had a cross-class audience in mind which, apart from the middle classes, also included a working-class readership.¹¹ For all these readers, *Household Words* was, in the words of Richard Altick,

a remarkable bargain. The writing and editing were done by competent professionals; controversial issues were treated forthrightly; general articles were not only patronizing rehashes of useful information; and the fiction was something more than the customary circumspect 'family' narrative, whose perfunctory morality did not wholly conceal a yawning emptiness of ideas. [...] Its great importance is that through the excellence of its contents and the prestige of Dickens's name it helped to break down further the still powerful upper- and middle-class prejudice against cheap papers. (*The English Common Reader* 347)

⁸ For a thorough investigation of Dickens's perception as a 'popular' writer cf. Rodensky. For the wider then-contemporary debate about 'popular' culture and specifically popular reading cf. Newey. Dickens's general affinity to, and belief in the importance of popular culture is discussed by John ("The Novels", *Dickens and Mass Culture*) and Schlicke as well as Ledger, who notes about *Household Words*: "Dickens's ambition in *Household Words* was nothing less than to wed an eighteenth-century conception of 'the People' as a political entity to the emergent nineteenth-century category of the 'populace' in a commercial culture" (172).

⁹ Cf. the entry on Dickens in the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, and Marks 170.

¹⁰ For a description and the history of *Household Words* cf. Lohrli.

¹¹ Huett notes an "ambiguity in the nature of Dickens's periodicals," stating that "on the one hand they were given an honorific treatment at their publication in semi-annual volume form, ready for inclusion in the most respectable library; on the other, they rubbed shoulders with the most disreputable forms of cheap literature while appearing in penny weekly numbers. This was evidently a deliberate choice on Dickens's part [...]. His wish that his writings should be available for purchase to as many readers as possible must have had an economic motive, but there was also a strong moral dimension to his thinking, as is evinced by the perpetual calls in his work for cheap, instructive entertainment for all" (78).

That Dickens had a popular periodical in mind from the outset is reflected in the title he chose from one of Shakespeare's most popular and patriotic plays, *Henry V*,¹² and which he explains in his "Preliminary Word":

We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers. We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all age and conditions, on whose faces we may never look.
(1)¹³

Dickens understood himself as the "Conductor" of his magazine, as its masthead declared ("Conducted by Charles Dickens"), and he would often demand drastic revisions from the authors who contributed to its pages. He intended *Household Words* to have not only a uniformity of voice¹⁴ – which was facilitated by the fact that most contributions were published anonymously¹⁵ – but also a uniformity of attitude and approach that would maintain the magazine's intended role as the audience's "comrade" and "friend". Such editorial policy received criticism in intellectual circles, but *Household Words* was "extremely popular" with "the uncritical public": "It had a sale of some forty thousand copies a week and became, as Dickens hoped it would, 'a good property', yielding 'a good round profit'" (Lohrli 23). This profit certainly benefited from Dickens's insistence that pieces of a predominantly informative nature should never be boring and dry:

Dickens's policy in the handling of non-fiction prose was that such material be treated in some distinctive manner – not in literal, matter-of-fact, 'encyclopaedical' fashion. Factual, informative, instructional, didactic material was to be presented in a 'fanciful', 'imaginative', 'picturesque', 'quaint' way. (Lohrli 9)

A policy regarding the magazine's 'philosophy' of history¹⁶ was not openly pronounced. However, its vision of the past, and the judgement of the past's significance for the present, are not uncharacteristic of the general tendencies outlined above and hover between affirmative and sceptical interpretations. It is conceded that history sometimes advanced the progress of mankind or the English nation, and that it can provide instruction for the present, but the presentation of history in *Household Words* also shows traces of what Patrick Brantlinger (in relation to Dickens's first historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*) refers to as "a nightmare from which we are always vainly trying to awake" (71).

Since the amount of pieces on history in *Household Words* is significant (on average a quarter of an issue¹⁷), my discussion is based on a two-year sample only, covering the issues from 25 January 1851 to 12 December 1853. 1851 is a most significant year for the mid-Victorian period: the year of the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace that afforded Britain an opportunity to display its modernity, power and wealth to the world. Present achievements took centre-stage, but the Exhibition also looked back to the past, for instance in its Medieval Court, which was designed to "showcase the products of skilled craftsmanship for comparison with those made

¹² The phrase occurs in the St. Crispian's speech in Act IV, where King Henry anticipates the popular memory of the men about to engage in battle: "Then shall our names, / Familiar in his mouth as household words [...] / Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered" (4.3.51-55).

¹³ All page numbers for *Household Words* articles refer to the texts as available in *Dickens Journals Online*.

¹⁴ On this uniform voice also cf. Farina.

¹⁵ Lohrli has identified many authors; all author names given subsequently are taken from her study.

¹⁶ "By 'philosophy of history' I mean any thoughtful effort to understand the relationship of the collective or societal past to the present and future" (Brantlinger 61).

¹⁷ This calculation is based on a counting of articles with historical subjects for the first issue of each half-yearly volume of *Household Words*.

using the new mass-production methods celebrated in other exhibits" (Leapman 136f.). More important for my selection, however, is the fact that the two years of the sample cover a major portion of the serialisation of Dickens's own *Child's History of England*, i.e. one of the few long works which he devoted explicitly to the treatment of history (the other two being *Barnaby Rudge* and another novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*).

Overall speaking, *Household Words* is eclectic and heterogeneous in its approach to the past, in terms of content as well as the formats in which it articulated an interest in history. In some instances, pieces seem to have found their way into the magazine simply because a writer – or the Conductor – stumbled across historical events, characters and curiosities and found them of interest for its readers. On 1 March 1851, *Household Words* treated readers to "A Royal Speech by James the First," while on 3 May 1851, it informed them about the last English pirates ("The Last of the Sea-Kings"). A piece on 19 July 1851 acquainted the audience with the history of Mormonism, a religion founded in 1830, and its founder Joseph Smith ("In the Name of the Prophet – Smith!"); this was topical history, not only because the Mormons were in the process of successfully settling Utah, but also because they were proselytising in Britain. On 2 August 1851, an article depicted the fate of "The Jews in China," whose community was dying and, as recent travellers reported, in need of support. "The Story of a Nation" (6 December 1851 and 13 December 1851) was another topical piece since the nation in question, Hungary, was still fighting for freedom from Austrian rule after a failed revolution in 1848. Other pieces were devoted to cultural history, such as "English Songs" (15 November 1851), which presented a poetic and musical tradition of which the English deserved to be proud. Just as varied as these themes were the modes in which the pieces were written. Some were expository articles written primarily for instruction, others were anecdotes, remarks on curiosities, or fictional stories and ballads with a historical setting, and very often they were printed side by side. In the issue of 8 Feb 1851, for instance, a monologue of the Nineveh Bull (a monument which the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard had recently excavated and brought as a treasure to the British Museum¹⁸) is preceded by a tale about an uncanny event set in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars ("A Confident Prediction"). Amid this variety, however, *Household Words* also had a number of recurrent features. Its most prominent engagement with history during its early years was the serialisation of *A Child's History of England*.

Written by Dickens himself, the *Child's History* stands in the tradition of earlier nineteenth-century history books for young readers, but Dickens used his *Child's History* specifically

to provide a variety of antidotes to nostalgic idealization of the past. He showed the 'rusty side of glory's blade' by his constant emphasis on the savagery, violence, and waste of life it entailed, but also by a calculated attempt to restore the dimension of class to the deceptively uniform social contours of the past. (Jann 200)

As a piece of historiography, the *Child's History* is flawed. John Gardiner notes that "its lack of dates or clear exposition of dynastic line is confusing; its biases are politically incorrect; and its bloodthirstiness is vaguely pornographic" (241), that there are distinctive anti-Catholic and patriotic notes as well as a preference for the Whig interpretation of history with "forwards-moving linear narratives" that have their "eye always on the sunny uplands of the present" (242). Overall, Gardiner diagnoses a "condescension for the past" and the fact that "few famous

¹⁸ Layard's first excavations took place in 1845-1847. He then mistook Nimrud for Nineveh but excavated the real Nineveh in another expedition from 1849. Layard's book account of his first expedition, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849), became a bestseller and attests the great public interest in archaeology. An abridged version, *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (1851) was produced for sale at the new railway bookstalls and helped to disseminate the book even further. On the impact of Layard's excavations upon various sectors of the "entertainment world" cf. Altick, *The Shows of London* 182.

individuals emerge favourably from Dickens's pages." There is a particular hostility to "most English rulers," with King Alfred alone emerging "with much credit, again perhaps echoing how Victorian historians traced the origins of English political liberty to Saxon times" (243). The King's thousandth birthday had been grandly celebrated in 1849, and, as Emily Walker Heady shows, Dickens presented the Saxon monarch through the optic of his own present and as a model of good citizenship. Alfred is considered exemplary partly because he was able to "improve his people in just the ways Dickens would see Victorian England bettered: better schools, better courts, more beauty, and thus more general happiness" (98). The second chapter of the *Child's History* (22 February 1851), for instance, claims that

under the Great Alfred, all the best points of the English-Saxon character were first encouraged, and in him first shown. It is the greatest character among the nations of the earth. Wherever the descendants of the Saxon race have gone, have sailed, or otherwise made their way, even to the remotest regions of the world, they have been patient, persevering, never to be broken in spirit, never to be turned aside from enterprises on which they have resolved. In Europe, Asia, Africa, America, the whole world over; in the desert, in the forest, on the sea; scorched by a burning sun, or frozen by ice that never melts; the Saxon blood remains unchanged. Wheresover [sic] that race goes, there, law, and industry, and safety for life and property, and all the great results of steady perseverance, are certain to arise. (528)¹⁹

Dickens's tendency to link the past to the present, and see it *through* the present, is an appropriate strategy to make history interesting and relevant to a general audience and especially to children. It is apparent throughout the first chapter of the *Child's History* (which was the opening piece on 25 January 1851) where Dickens 'familiarises' the remote historical scenario of ancient Britain – and history as a whole – by referring to elements which his (young) readers know from their own experience, for instance when he points out that Julius Caesar's attempted invasion was launched "from the French coast between Calais and Boulogne, 'because thence was the shortest passage into Britain;' just for the same reason as our steam-boats now take the same track, every day" (410). The chapter ends with a reference to the remains of Roman days that were still to be seen in nineteenth-century England and that were constantly excavated while England was being modernised:

Often, when labourers are digging up the ground, to make foundations for houses or churches, they light on rusty money that once belonged to the Romans. Fragments of plates from which they ate, of goblets from which they drank, and of pavement on which they trod, are discovered among the earth that is broken by the plough, or the dust that is crumbled by the gardener's spade. Wells that the Romans sunk still yield water; roads that the Romans made form part of our highways. (412)

Caesar's attempted invasions would have recalled, at least among adult readers, fears associated with more recent history, especially the Napoleonic Wars. But the narrator assures his readers that the ancient Britons defended their liberty as valiantly as their descendants did in the war against the French Emperor:

¹⁹ Henry VIII, by contrast, was openly denounced as "a most intolerable ruffian, a disgrace to human nature, and a blot of blood and grease upon the History of England" – despite his breach with the Roman Catholic Church: "Henry the Eighth has been favoured by some Protestant writers, because the Reformation was achieved in his time. But the mighty merit of it lies with other men and not with him; and it can be rendered none the worse by this monster's crimes, and none the better by any defence of them" (issue of 12 February 1853, 528).

Julius Caesar [...] had expected to find pearls in Britain, and he may have found a few, for anything I know! but, at all events, he found delicious oysters, and I am sure he found tough Britons, of whom, I dare say, he made the same complaint as Napoleon Buonaparte, the great French General did, eighteen hundred years afterwards, when he said they were such unreasonable fellows that they never knew when they were beaten. They never *did* know, I believe, and never will. (411)

Of course, the Romans eventually did occupy Britain for a considerable period, but this is a fact which Dickens's narrative presents, despite much "terrible fighting and bloodshed", as ultimately a step towards civilisation. When the Romans left,

they had done much to improve the condition of the Britons. [...] they had taught them how to dress and arm themselves much better than they had ever known how to do before; they had refined the whole British way of living. [...] Above all, it was in the Roman time, and by means of Roman ships, that the Christian Religion was first brought into Britain, and its people first taught the great lesson that, to be good in the sight of God, they must love their neighbours as themselves, and do unto others as they would be done by. (ibid.)

Not only does this passage exemplify a forward-looking narrative of history. It also expresses the perspective of a country whose own Empire was expanding and that was itself busy colonising, civilising and Christianising large parts of the world – as *Household Words* reminded its readers in many articles with an Empire theme.²⁰ In this respect too *Household Words* was clearly presenting the past through the lens of the present, and this strategy recurs in many other pieces with a historical focus. Several of these appeared as part of two irregular series of the magazine, "Shadows" and "Our Phantom Ship."

Pieces under the first rubric were written by Charles Knight and presented anecdotes and scenes from the past centring on more or less well-known personalities, men as well as women.²¹ They introduced readers to the 'shadows,' for instance, of "Ben Jonson's Mother" (20 September 1851), "Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville" (26 June 1852), or "Fanny Burney at Court" (10 July 1852), in the latter case focusing on the unhappiness that the eighteenth-century author suffered during the two years she served in the queen's household, cut off from conversation with other writers and hardly able to write.

Articles for "Our Phantom Ship" were written by Henry Morley, a journalist whom Dickens had invited to join the regular staff of *Household Words*. Using the contemporary tastes for travel (or armchair travel) and ghost stories, the 'phantom' ship was a narrative device for imaginary, 'disembodied' travel that permitted the writer to present panoramic portraits of foreign lands such as China, Japan and Central America. The phantom ship 'sailed' through their topographies, but often also their histories. The issue of 18 January 1851 introduced readers to "Negro Land," with a focus on current interests. One such interest was exploration and especially

²⁰ Cf. the following pieces on colonies or regions of former British colonial interest: "The Cape and the Kaffirs: A History" (5 April 1851); "Madagascar: A History" (14 June 1851); "Three Colonial Epochs" (of Australia, 31 January 1852); "Indian Railroads and Commerce" (15 March 1851).

²¹ *Household Words* also included more formal biographical sketches of historical figures and celebrities from the more recent past like Giovanni Belzoni (1 March 1851), the highly popular archaeologist and former strongman, as well as occasional instances of 'oral history': From 24 May to 21 June 1851, *Household Words* presented, for instance, a five-piece series entitled "The Story of a Sailor's Life." The man's life was colourful and adventurous, but his account was explicitly introduced as being true to fact: "The following curiosity is the real autobiography of an Ancient Mariner still living. We present it to our readers in the old man's own words. We may sometimes omit a few passages, and may sometimes alter his orthography, but we shall in no other respect interpose between him and the homely truth of his narrative" (211).

the fate of a famous explorer, Mungo Park, who had disappeared during his second journey along the river Niger in 1805, his fate being “like the fate of Franklin – a long mystery” (401). Sir John Franklin had gone missing in 1845, during his quest for the North-West Passage, and *Household Words*, like other media, kept its readers up-to-date about the various Franklin search expeditions.²² Even more prominently, “Negro Land” referred to slavery and its history, and in this respect was likewise topical. After a long campaign, Britain had abolished slavery in its own Empire in 1833 and refashioned itself from the Atlantic world’s leading slave trader to its leading abolitionist, as the article emphasises: “England, since that date, has considered herself pledged to active and unwearied labour for the abolition of all trade in human beings among civilised communities” (402). However, while conceding that this engagement is “a fit work for a great country to set about” (ibid.), the article claims that England has not yet done enough, especially in Africa itself. The measure proposed to finally end the slave trade in “Negro Land” bespeaks a Victorian belief in commerce and racial superiority allegedly ‘proved’ by history:

History proves that commerce is the great means ordained by Providence for the improvement and advancement of the human race. For this the Africans are ripe. They do not see the moral wrong of slavery – no uncivilised nation ever yet did. But they are quite ready to believe white men, who say that it is wrong, and show them what is better; they are eager for instruction from the white man’s wisdom. (407)

The phantom ship even ventured into worlds that could be visited only in the imagination, though an imagination based on scientific investigation. On 16 August 1851, the ship was “on an Antediluvian Course,” exploring a past “quite out of human recollection” which amateur and scientific palaeontology, however, had been uncovering over the past decades.²³ Fossils were an attraction of museums and exhibitions, but they came alive in the article’s fiction of time travel and its vivid narrative of exploration, which sets out from a familiar spot in present-day London:

So we walk down Cheapside, bustle aboard at London Bridge, and sail out, leaving man behind us. Leaving man behind us; for a thousand years roll back upon themselves with every syllable we utter; years, by millions and millions, will return about us, and restore their dead before our ghostly voyage back into the past is ended. [...] Land ho! Then let us go ashore. This is some part of South America; there rolls a mighty river, like the rivers that now roll over that continent; we plunge into deep forests; let us now sit down under the trees, and speculate upon that world, into which we spirits of the future have receded. [...] A huge creature, a colossal armadillo, looking like a tortoise very little smaller than a horse, mounted on massive bony feet, scratches and digs busily by our side, eating his vegetable dinner. He is the Glyptodon. (492)

Quite obviously, armchair travel here serves as a fanciful and entertaining packaging for (pre-)historical information. While the “Phantom Ship” took readers on imagined, panoramic journeys, accounts of actual travel (which formed a major part of Victorian reading interest generally) also often included bits of history – or were even specifically devoted to sites of historical significance which the increasing number of travellers to the Continent, or the colonial traveller, might visit themselves and thus become involved in a quite practical engagement with the past.

²² “Our Phantom Ship Among the Ice” (12 April 1851) includes extensive comment on the history of British Arctic and Antarctic exploration.

²³ Charles Lyell was the leading geologist of the Victorian age. His main book publications, the *Principles of Geology* and the *Elements of Geology*, appeared in the 1830s. He was knighted in 1848.

One such sight was Pompeii, the subject of a still popular novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). A sketch of a visit to Pompeii that refers to the novel appeared in *Household Words* on 8 May 1852, conveying a lively and strongly visual impression of what still fascinates visitors of “The City of Sudden Death” today: the fact that the moment of the city’s destruction and its people’s death has been so perfectly preserved. On 30 August 1851, readers were treated to an account of a trip to a destination closer to Britain in terms of space and time, as the ‘communicative memory’ (Assmann) of the Battle of Waterloo, where Wellington had defeated Napoleon, was still alive.²⁴ “A Day at Waterloo,” written by William Howitt, depicted a trip which the more affluent readers of *Household Words* might easily undertake themselves, by steamer and train, as the article suggests at the beginning: “In less than twenty-four hours from the time that one conceives the idea, it is possible to be standing on the spot where Wellington saw the Imperial Guard give way before his troops, and felt that the great contest of the age was decided” (539). Once the historical site is reached, the article’s depiction becomes detailed and, like in the sketch of Pompeii, lets the reader – and potential future visitor – share the battle tourist’s experience: a mixture of being awed by Waterloo’s historical significance, the death of thousands of soldiers, but also its aura of authenticity. At the actual site of the epoch-making battle, an event that has already become a remote spectre, “something afar-off,” “only half-real,” becomes “real” and “present” again:

Soon after issuing from Soigne to the great paved road again, we began to see the pyramidal hill, surmounted by the Lion raised by the Belgians on the spot where the chief fury of the battle raged, showing itself aloft in the opening of the road. It is strange what a sensation the first sight of this monument of the grand conflict, which at once terminated the lives of seventy thousand human creatures, and the destinies of Napoleon, gave us. A solemn brooding horror seemed to hover about it; a *vivid* consciousness of the *reality* of the terrible scenes which had taken place there, comes with its *presence*. It stood up *like a giant spectre of the past*, assuring us that we were now *actually* on the spot which had, for a great part of our lives, been talked of as something afar off, and, therefore, like the things of another world, only half real. (540, emphases added)

These are solemn impressions which battlefield and cemetery tourism still elicits today. However, in accordance with Dickens’s programme for *Household Words*, other parts of the article are more light-hearted, for instance where it comments on the tourist infrastructure:

In Waterloo, there is an excellent hotel kept by Serjeant Munday, an Englishman who was in the battle, and who has succeeded as guide to his brother-in-law [...]. The house cannot be missed by the Englishman or American visiting the spot; its name and the name of the host being painted in bold letters along its front. It is a cheering thing to an Englishman who comes here, and finds himself surrounded by Belgian peasants, in blue slops and cloth caps, vociferous as jackdaws and voracious as horseflies, to cicerone you over the field, of the real history of which they know little, and that little pervert most liberally, to see a fine manly fellow of his own nation step forth to receive him. The Belgian guides are great dealers in manufactured relics, and one man professes to have been the guide of Lord Byron – at which time the said precocious guide must have been just three years old! If you visit the field, Serjeant Munday is your man. He is about sixty; hale; fresh; frank; upwards of six feet in height, and a gentleman in manners. He has none of the showman about him. You go over the ground feeling as if you had fallen in

²⁴ During the two sample years, another travel sketch led the reader fascinated with the Emperor to Napoleon’s last abode on the island of St Helena (“Twenty Shillings for a Napoleon,” 12 June 1852).

with a well-informed yeoman of the neighbourhood, who is delighted to conduct you over that most impressive scene, and tell you all that he knows of it. [...] With this excellent guide, we drove on, after a hearty luncheon, to Mont St. Jean, where we stopped a short time to examine the Museum of Waterloo relics, which is kept there by his daughter. Here, besides portraits and autographs of almost all the eminent generals concerned in the battle, including those of Wellington, Napoleon, and Blücher, there is an immense collection of arms, cuirasses, clothing, and accoutrements, gathered from the field. [...] Many and strange are the thoughts which come crowding on you at the sight of these relics, and of pecks of bullets, and heaps of cannon-balls, of bombshells, and broken lances, and pioneers' axes, which are collected here. But the field itself demanded us, and we drove on. (540f.)

The museum of Waterloo would indeed have been an attraction for the visitor from a society obsessed with things (cf. Briggs). It is not surprising, therefore, that another group of articles in *Household Words* introduced readers to the past by presenting them with the history of the many things, consumer goods and institutions by which they were surrounded in their everyday lives, while others were disappearing in the process of modernisation, as George A. Sala noted in a piece on "Things Departed" from the London cityscape during the author's lifetime (17 January 1852). In the two sample years, articles were devoted, for instance, to the histories of coffee culture in Britain, of the potato's introduction to the British Isles, or of the pottery and porcelain from which food and drink were consumed.²⁵ The history of textile production and that of its tools were explored in contributions by Harriet Martineau,²⁶ who, apart from these 'feminine' interests, also wrote on subjects more to the taste of male readers in the Victorian family, for instance in an article on "Guns and Pistols" and their historical use (13 March 1852). In an age of great concern with knowledge and its dissemination in the whole of society, readers were also informed about the history of writing and literacy ("The Birth and Parentage of Letters", 27 September 1851). The history of the postal services – reformed in the penny post of 1840 – was illuminated in a piece on "King Charles's Post-Bag" (12 June 1852), and Dickens's concern for the labouring classes is reflected in articles on the history of "The Labourer's Reading-Room" (13 September 1851) and "The Merchant Seaman's Fund" (13 December 1851). But readers also learned about the history of popular entertainments such as the puppet theatre and musical automatons,²⁷ and Londoners and potential visitors to the capital were informed about the tradition behind "Locking Up the Tower of London" (20 March 1852), one of the most popular London monuments. True to its social-critical programme, *Household Words* also engaged in the contemporary debate about who should be granted admission to the nation's monuments²⁸ – a debate that had resurged over the issue of whether the 'masses' should be admitted to the Great Exhibition. In an article on "The British Museum a Century Ago," written by William Blanchard Jerrold and published in the issue of 3 May 1851, almost immediately after the Exhibition had opened (on 1 May), *Household Words* was keen to point out that no working-class labourer had ever desecrated the museums or galleries to which he had been admitted,

²⁵ "The Great Coffee Question" (12 April 1851) and "A Cup of Coffee" (28 August 1852); "A Dish of Vegetables" (22 May 1852); "Pottery and Porcelain" (4 October 1851).

²⁶ "Rainbow Making" (14 February 1852); "Kendal Weavers and Weaving" (15 November 1851); "Needles" (28 February 1852).

²⁷ "The Pedigree of Puppets" (31 January 1852); "Wonderful Toys" (14 February 1852). On the popularity of automatons in the nineteenth century cf. Altick, *The Shows of London* ch. 25.

²⁸ On the debate about admission to monuments and museums as an issue of social reform cf. Altick, *The Shows of London* ch. 31, who notes that "[b]y the time the dust settled in 1851 [...], these famous London sights now attracted crowds unthought of a mere decade earlier" (454).

and it compared the present situation favourably with a past in which access to the museum had still been subjected to severe class restrictions:

The mean precautions of the last century, contrast happily with the enlightened liberty of this. Crowds of all ranks and conditions besiege the doors of the British Museum – especially in holiday time; yet the skeleton of the elephant is spotless – the bottled rattlesnakes pickle in peace. The Elgin marbles have suffered no abatement of their profuse beauty; and the coat of the camelopard is yet without a blemish. (131)

Around 1851, the Great Exhibition cast its presence over many issues of *Household Words*. Its issue of 3 May also included an article on “The May Palace,” written by Charles Knight, which praised the achievements of the workers who had built this cathedral of progress, and praised the Exhibition’s

determination to assert the dignity of labour; to manifest to those who hold that the world is made for the few, that throughout the habitable globe there are the same agencies at work which have given the mechanic of the nineteenth century a greater command of the comforts of life than was possessed by the feudal lord of the sixteenth. (123)

That the age of the Crystal Palace was one of progress was emphasised within the article itself through comments on the history of glass and steel, i.e. the then spectacularly modern materials with which the Palace was built. The modernity of the year 1851 was also emphasised, however, by the fact that the “May Palace” article was the culmination of a series of three pieces (“Three May-Days in London”), the two preceding ones being dedicated to May Days in earlier periods of English history in which the working classes were not yet in command of the “comforts of life” (123)²⁹

In light of Dickens’s preference for his own time and scepticism of the merits of the past, it is to be expected that the sample from *Household Words* includes an article directed against the contemporary fashion of medievalism. Henry Morley’s “Mr. Bull at Home in the Middle Ages” (1 November 1851) imagines the personification of the English nation, John Bull, living in the Middle Ages and concludes that for ordinary people, this period was hardly a pleasant one:

When it is remembered that the details of home comfort which we have given, miserable as they are, have been drawn from the establishment of Kings, it will be easy to imagine what was the condition of the common people in this country during the blessed ages of romance and chivalry. Those wretched good old times! There is hardly a glory in them that will bear the light. (125)

With its explicit contrasts between present and past, and an evaluation of these contrasts, “Mr. Bull at Home in the Middle Ages” belongs in the group of articles in *Household Words* that aimed to shape their readers’ attitudes towards history.

As his “Preliminary Word” suggests, Dickens encouraged the idea that the readers of his magazine should consider themselves lucky to have escaped the past. But while the present and the future seemed more desirable chronotopes, a look the past could also caution progressivist views and teach a disturbing lesson about the future’s possible end. The Nineveh Bull’s

²⁹ The issue of 19 April 1851 presented a scene set in 1517, a time of “fear and trouble in London on the eve of May-day, in the ninth year of King Henry the Eighth” (73), when apprentices rioted and subsequent May celebrations were suspended. The article in the issue of 26 April 1851 was set in May Fair 1701 with the intention to show, in comparison to 1851, “what a century and a half have accomplished for England and the world” (106).

monologue in the issue of 8 February 1851, written by W.H. Stone, is a melancholy complaint about the fall of the great Assyrian empire, once proudly represented by the winged Bull, now in the British museum. It begins with the evocation of power and pride: "I felt myself the guardian of a nation's history, the emblem of its power, and the thought stamped itself on my features in a smile which has endured till now, proud at once and solemn, showing a consciousness not unpleasing of my might and glorious destiny" (468). However, on the following page, in a fast-forward rendition of the course of the ages, the Bull then witnesses the decay of the Assyrian empire and its city ("we were left to silent ruin") and is eventually buried ("a heap of earth covered all in, and no vestige of our magnificence remained"), until it is excavated by Layard and taken to a new Empire of the modern world, "the wonder of earth's younger children" and "prouder, greater, more glorious than my native realm." This powerful empire, the Bull admonishes, may also not endure: "but boast not, ye vainglorious creatures of an hour. I have outlived many mighty kingdoms, perchance I may be destined to survive one more" (469). Such meditations on transitory greatness were not uncommon in Victorian Britain. They were part of a widespread awareness of a coming pastness of the present exemplified in Blanchard Jerrold and Doré's vision of a London in ruins at the end of their *London* book. Such visions continued Romantic ruminations on the transitoriness of power poignantly expressed, for instance, in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," and poetry remained a favourite vehicle for articulating this fateful view of historical development,³⁰ also in *Household Words*. "The Cities of Time" (7 August 1852), written by Richard H. Horne, projected the image of "Wrecks and ruins of great cities, / Crowded once with countless numbers" but now overgrown by a "deep and death-like forest" (489). Another poem, "The Warnings of the Past" (28 June 1851), was even more explicit as to the lessons to be learned from the voices of the past: "They bid him listen to the tales they tell / Of nations perish'd and embalm'd in story; / How inly rotting they were sapp'd and fell, / Like some proud oak whilom the forest's glory" (332).

Conclusions

As this survey of a sample from *Household Words* indicates, Dickens's magazine confronted its cross-class, cross-gender and cross-generational readers with a wide range of approaches to history, opinions on history, and possibilities to represent and reflect about history. This reflection encompassed both melancholy projections of a future 'end of history' and a more optimistic narrative of progress in which the Victorian present appeared as the pinnacle of the advancement of civilisation. Overall speaking, the glimpses of history proffered in *Household Words* were eclectic and various. Being 'interesting,' 'curious' and 'entertaining' seems to have been a major criterion of selection for the material that was permitted to enter the pages of the magazine. Yet some prominent leitmotifs emerge in the magazine's approach to the past: First, a significant share of pieces is concerned with more recent history, a past still within living memory such as the Napoleonic Wars. Second, certain national interests emerge, such as the number of pieces with a colonial theme or those that emphasise Britain's role as a technological and economic world leader. Third and most notably, *Household Words* makes a strong attempt to depict such aspects of the past in which its readers would be interested, or could be *made* interested because they seemed relevant to current concerns. Many pieces link the past to its readers' everyday lives, or tie it to other popular interests of the Victorian public, such as its enthusiasm for travel, exploration or mere sightseeing. They also often intersect with the

³⁰ Cf. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's narrative poem "The Burden of Nineveh" (1850), which was also inspired by Layard's finds.

presentation of the past in other contemporary media, such as exhibitions, panoramas and historical paintings, and may have enticed readers to visit such shows in their leisure hours.

Household Words was strongly shaped by its Conductor's interest in social reform and the situation of the labouring classes. However, besides its idiosyncrasies, *Household Words* is also representative of the Victorian family magazine's approach to history. These magazines had different aims and were indebted to different ideologies that coloured their treatments of historical subjects. But in all of them 'history' was a staple and served the interest of a culture whose historical consciousness was as essential for its self-definition as was the country's modern standing in the world.

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