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**DICKENS  
and THACKERAY  
in Providence**



Presented by

**“The Old Stone Bank”**

Providence, R. I.

April 20, 1931



## Dickens and Thackeray in Providence

UNTIL the recent death of Arnold Bennett disrupted England's great literary quartet, there were four men who we might nominally suppose would have drawn immense and enthusiastic audiences around their lecture platforms, regardless of where they happened to be; — Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy, and Shaw, lions *de belles lettres* from any standpoint, in any category. If they were to appear in these United States at the present time, we might naturally imagine that out of the flourishing populations of our larger cities we could draw enough from the curious and enthusiastic to give them the thrilling reception of a good-sized, ogling and cheering crowd. Take Providence, for instance. Out of our present population, slightly in excess of 250,000, we should be able to greet Mr. Wells with a bouquet of a few thousand at least were he to step among us from the platform of a New York, New Haven & Hartford pullman. A few thousand would crowd the Union Station very respectably and should be sufficient to raise a good-sized lump in the lion's throat. A few thousand indeed! A small courtesy to a famous guest! The



question is would we offer it except under the gentle stimulus of a prodding riot squad? The answer is obvious. Perhaps, among the four, one exception could be made and that for George Bernard Shaw. In fact there really is little doubt but what he could command a self-ordained brigade of admirers at least equal to that which has been seen following Primo de Carnera up Broadway. But Mr. Shaw will not be seen this side the Atlantic—not for awhile certainly.

At this writing, of course, one of these four celebrated gentlemen is in America on a lecture tour. But Mr. Galsworthy merely serves as a handy case in point. He has been greeted enthusiastically by the few who always offer a sincere welcome. But there does not seem to be any startling episode in connection with any of his lectures thus far, no storming of the doors in the manner in which New York greeted Einstein. Strangely enough, too, Mr. Galsworthy, surely as much a man's author as any, has found his audiences made up for the most part of the opposite sex.

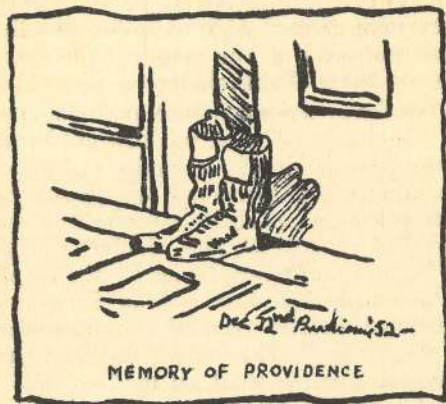
What has happened through the slow process of the past seventy-five years? Have we relegated literature, or rather its appreciation, to our women? Someone has recently ventured to say as much. But that

question we cannot argue here. In fact, the whole purpose of this seemingly long introduction is merely to bring into sharper relief the situation that existed in the days when Dickens and Thackeray came to the United States, and, more specifically, to Providence. Literary lions then—and still able to roar despite the strangling years—they were greeted with an enthusiasm that must put most of our present day expressions of hospitality to shame.

Thackeray was the first to arrive, coming to this city in 1852. It was that old Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers which sponsored his appearance, the association which back in the 18th century had initiated the idea of offering series of lectures on literary topics for the benefit of its members and the public. Perhaps if we quote directly from the reminiscences of Eyre Crowe, Thackeray's secretary and tour manager, we shall get the best idea of what happened. He wrote as follows:

“So thither we went, (i. e. to Boston) making raids, besides, on neighboring capitals. One of these was 44 miles off by rail, i. e. Providence, R. I. The journey was easy, the audience large and appreciative. This was on Dec. 22, when nights were getting chilly. It was, therefore, a little rough upon those fond of their cheerful cigar to be compelled, as most of them were, to content themselves with a discussion on the benefits conferred upon that State by liquor laws

prohibiting the sale of alcoholic drinks. Everybody, I noticed, went to bed early. I only sketched a pair of bluchers whose shadow was cast upon the sleeper's room door outside at the hotel. I can therefore only mention Providence apropos de *bottes*."



Evidently if Thackeray's reception on the lecture platform was great, there was some slight in his entertainment. A word here about Eyre Crowe. That gentleman, who styled himself "Thackeray's pen holder," nourished an artistic talent by making sketches while on tour, using Thackeray's gold pen in the process. The pair of boots, which he calls his sole memory of Providence, are pictured in his accompanying sketch.

Thackeray's lecture took place in Old Howard Hall at the northeast corner of Westminster and Dorrance Streets. He himself, like Roger Williams, had gone to Charterhouse School and was able to compliment his audience by remembering the initials "R. W." which he had found cut on a beam in that venerable institution. In view of the great multitude which crowded Howard Hall, the notice of the lecture in the *Providence Journal* of the next day seems strangely brief. It reads as follows:

#### THACKERAY'S LECTURE

"Howard Hall was crowded to its utmost capacity to hear Thackeray's lecture on Swift. The seats were all occupied and the aisles were filled with people. The lecture of the greatest satirist of our day upon one of the greatest satirists who ever wrote in the English language was listened to with close and gratified attention. He will deliver two more lectures in this city, not, however, in the regular course of the Mechanic's Association. We understand he said it was the largest audience that he ever addressed."

Thus 19th century Providence greeted Thackeray. In 1852, its population was about 42,000. Yet Howard Hall, large certainly, was crowded to capacity, and Thackeray was called on to give two more lectures, evidently not on his original program.

Let us proceed fifteen years to Dickens. How was he received? It is from the reminiscences of his secretary, too, that we draw the bulk of our information. These were published in book form and reviewed in



Sidney S. Rider's *Book Notes* of February 28, 1885.

You will remember that Charles Dickens was not unknown personally in America in 1867. He had visited this country in 1842, sweeping through one cordial reception after another from January to June and then returning to write his unnecessarily bitter *American Notes*. Yet upon his arrival at the railroad station in Providence on February 20, 1867, was Providence aloof? Emphatically no. Even he was startled at the sight of the thousands who crowded the station, craning necks and elbowing about to get a glimpse of him. Thousands greeted him, and yet, in 1867, the population of Providence was only 55,000 in all.

After alighting from the car, Dickens and Mr. Dolby, his secretary, set out for their hotel on foot according to their custom. Immediately the whole crowd to a man strode after them as though they were a pair of Pied Pipers. Through the streets they marched, the crowd orderly enough, Dickens vastly amused. Occasionally some bolder one would dart suddenly ahead for a brief stare at the Englishmen or for a chance to shake Dickens' hand. Finally two policemen, standing near the line of march and seeing the strange plight of Dickens and Mr. Dolby, came to their aid and escorted them to the hotel. When the hotel came in sight, the crowd dispersed momentarily in order to run ahead and form two lines on either

side of the steps leading up to the main entrance. Through these Dickens and his secretary walked, braving the gauntlet of curiosity with enjoyment. Dickens remarked at the time that it was very like going into a police van in Bow Street.

Instead of lectures Dickens gave readings that evening and the one following, February 20th and 21st, respectively. The place selected was City Hall, and here a huge crowd gathered each night, responding to the readings in a way which delighted Dickens as much as the gate receipts. On the 20th he read the "Christmas Carol" and "The Trial," continuing on the 21st with "Dr. Marigold" and "Bob Sawyer's Party." The pecuniary returns from these readings were amazing to both Englishmen, for they had believed Providence "an isolated sort of place." Net profits amounted to \$2,140 for the two nights, equal to twice as much in these days.

Such was the way Providence of last century responded and worshiped her literary idols. To whom would she turn out en masse today?