

## Dickens In America

12/2/09

reprinted from [The Writer's Almanac](#)

**It was on this day** in 1867 that [Charles Dickens \(books by this author\)](#) gave his first public reading in America, kicking off a four-month reading tour. Throughout his career, Dickens had given readings in England, and they were incredibly popular, and now the United States was begging Dickens to come over and read there, something that Dickens was not sure he wanted to do. He had been to America once before, in 1842, not to give readings but just to see the country. He liked some things about America, but the book he wrote about his experience, *American Notes* (1842), was extremely critical. Not only did he think that buildings were too hot and that people had bad manners, but he denounced slavery and felt that Americans were too greedy and that business in this country put too much emphasis on individual gain. He also set parts of his next novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), in America, and used it as another space to condemn American values.

So Dickens was not very enthusiastic about returning to the U.S., but he had a large family who could really use some extra money, and so finally he listened seriously to the proposal. But he still wasn't convinced. His most recent tour manager, George Dolby, was talented and dependable, and Dickens decided to send him over to America to scout it out and decide whether or not he should undergo a tour. He said he would do whatever Dolby judged best. Dolby went and met with many important people, and he finally recommended that Dickens come, and so he did. The first readings would be in Boston, followed by New York.

Tickets were set to go on sale on November 18th for the readings in Boston. A ticket cost two dollars. They were sold at the Boston publishing house of Ticknor and Fields. Before the sale, Mr. Fields told George Dolby that in fact he already had a list of 250 people for each of the first four readings who had personally asked him to reserve tickets for them, and Fields admitted that everyone else who worked at the publishing house had a similar list. Dolby thought this gave an unfair advantage to people who had connections to the publishers, so he refused to use the lists and insisted that people show up in person on November 18th and buy tickets. Hundreds of people who were concerned they wouldn't be able to get any tickets tried to find ways around this, and many personally approached Dolby and claimed to be ill, blind, paralyzed, or deaf, and therefore wanted seats ahead of time, and wanted them in the front row.

On the night of November 17th, a huge crowd formed outside the publishing house to wait for the next morning. Rich people sent their servants or employees, and they all set up straw beds and camped out and drank a lot and had a good time. And by early the next morning, the line was half a mile long. The tickets for those four readings in Boston generated \$14,000 worth of money that day.

Dickens himself arrived on November 19th. For a couple of weeks, Dickens relaxed

somewhat, visited friends and colleagues, and had Thanksgiving dinner with Longfellow.

For the reading on December 2nd, Dickens chose *A Christmas Carol* and the trial scene from *The Pickwick Papers*, both audience favorites. The next day, a Boston newspaper wrote:

The entertainment is unlike anything we have ever seen in this country. It is rather a dramatic recitation than a reading, references to the book being very infrequent, and all the parts being recited with appropriate voice and action ... The audience last evening were in the best of spirits from the start ... and the first mention of well-known characters [...] was received with tempests of applause.

The readings continued for months in much the same vein, incredibly popular, and Dickens is estimated to have made almost 20,000 British pounds. But the tour was stressful and took a toll on the writer's health.

In his farewell speech in New York in April, he admitted he had changed his mind about some aspects of American culture. He said he wanted to "declare how astounded I have been by the amazing changes that I have seen around me on every side — changes moral, changes physical."