

**‘ALL THE YEAR ROUND’ AND ‘THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER’  
1859 TO 1870**

Dickens separated from his wife Catherine in May 1858. Characteristically he published a statement (‘Personal’ June 12, 1858) in *Household Words*, which he also wanted published in *Punch*, which was also printed by his printers, Bradbury and Evans. When they refused, he decided to wind up the journal, no longer work with them, and undertake the complete running of a replacement journal to be called *All The Year Round*. He was to have a 75% share and his sub-editor W H Wills 25%, so in very real terms, he was in control. He set up new offices, still in Wellington Street, and published the first issue of the new journal on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1859, with the opening episode of *A Tale of Two Cities* as its leading article. It was later to serialise *Great Expectations*. It followed the same editorial principles as its predecessor and indeed stressed the continuity by advertising the incorporation of *Household Words* on every title page. It was phenomenally successful, with circulation as high, at times as 300,000.

Of course there were new developments too. Dickens introduced, in January 1860, a series of articles with a central narrator-figure called The Uncommercial Traveller, working for the firm of Human Interest Brothers. This is the final development of an idea he had written to Forster about on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1849 when contemplating setting up *Household Words*.

. . . Now to bind all this together . . . I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, by sunlight, moonlight, starlight, firelight, candlelight, and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognisant of everything, and go everywhere, without the least difficulty. Which may be in the Theatre, the Palace, the House of Commons, the Prisons, the Unions, the Churches, on the Railroad, on the Sea, abroad and at home: a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature. . . . I want him to loom as a fanciful thing all over London; and to get up a general notion of "What will the Shadow say about this, I wonder? What will the Shadow say about that? Is the Shadow here?" and so forth. . . .it presents an odd, unsubstantial, whimsical, new thing: a sort of previously unthought-of Power going about . . .in which people will be perfectly willing to believe, and which is just mysterious and quaint enough to have a sort of charm for their imagination, while it will represent common-sense and humanity. I want to express in the title, and in the grasp of the idea to express also, that it is the Thing at everybody's elbow, and in everybody's footsteps. At the window, by the fire, in the street, in the house, from infancy to old age, everyone's inseparable companion. . . .

This persona deals with topics of the day close to Dickens's heart and created some of the finest examples of the periodical essay in the language: in them he reaches the summit of his achievement in this kind of writing: observant, reflective, with a sensitive touch on the times. He can also be satirical, comic, campaigning: all the moods we constantly find in him. He continued to edit *All The Year Round* until his death in 1870, and the journal continued under the editorship of his eldest son Charley until 1895.

He introduces himself as the Uncommercial Traveller thus:

I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers, and have rather a large connection in the fancy goods way. Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent-garden, London - now about the city streets: now, about the country by-roads - seeing many little things, and some great things, which, because they interest me, I think may interest others.

There were three phases of *Uncommercial Traveller* essays published: the first from January to October 1860 comprised seventeen papers, published at irregular intervals but mostly weekly or fortnightly. Dickens collected these together for separate publication later that year. Dickens then directed his attention to writing and publishing *Great Expectations* in weekly episodes in the journal, as well as giving seasons of public readings in London and on a provincial tour together with a very successful series of readings in the British Embassy in Paris. The second series of twelve *Uncommercial Traveller* essays appeared between May and October 1863, followed by his final completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, in monthly parts in 1864-5. There had been further highly successful reading seasons in London and provincial tours, and in 1867-8 a reading tour of the United States. The third series did not appear until 1868 and was heralded by an essay called "'The Ruffian" by The Uncommercial Traveller' on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1868. This final series of seven 'New Uncommercial Samples' then appeared, with the final one in June 1869.

*The Uncommercial Traveller* essays, therefore, amount to thirty-seven different papers published between 1860 and 1869: they span the final years of their creator's life. Dickens had confidence in them: they were the first pieces of journalism he advertised under his own name. They were collected and published at various times as a collection. This in a way has caused some difficulty for later readers in establishing exactly what kind of writing they are encountering here. It is still the case that one can find the volume described as 'a novel' and this confusion is further created by the individual articles being labelled as 'chapters' in later reprints. We need to remember that the essays appeared in the context of a weekly journal and

were spread over a long period of time. We should not expect to find a developing plot-line connecting them together. There is another aspect to be borne in mind too. Dickens chooses to present these essays in the first-person narrative mode and this is what binds them together: the voice of the narrator. We need to remember that the narrator is as much of a creation as well. In one of the later essays 'A Fly-Leaf in a Life' (22 May 1869) he writes that he is 'accustomed to observe myself as curiously as if I were another man'. There has been confusion about the nature of the narrator because a number of the essays have what seems to be a highly personal, even autobiographical slant attached to them and interpretations have been made which see them as manifestations of Dickens himself: this is not always the case even when it seems like it or he claims it.

What we have here is a complex, mature method of narrating the material: a mixture of fact and imagination, sometimes drawing on direct experience, sometimes offering more fanciful approaches. For him, they had the advantage of keeping him before the public eye in the pages of his journal when he was not engaged in publishing a full-scale novel or directly in contact with the public by means of the public readings. They provide examples of Dickens's journalism at its best.