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Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh and Jon Mee, eds., *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities and the French Revolution*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). 240 pp. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-53778-1.

Review by Micah Alpaugh, University of Pennsylvania.

French Revolutionists have had a long and ambivalent relationship with Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Receiving undergraduate students whose secondary curricula has focused as much or more on the novel in English courses as they have on the French Revolution in history, in lectures and paper-grading one often confronts a surprising number of students with very strong ideas about the supposed cruelty of French nobles, the hunger of the French masses, and a wide variety of ambivalent (but sometimes enthusiastic) views about the Parisian 'mob.' Few, if any, works have so greatly influenced how the general public in the Anglophone world thinks about revolution.

Edited interdisciplinarily by Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh and Jon Mee—one historian and two literature professors—*Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities and the French Revolution*, both develops a more subtle interpretation of the historiographical and political influences upon Dickens and looks at the influence of *A Tale of Two Cities* over the hundred and fifty years since its publication. Particularly illuminating is the decentralization of Thomas Carlyle's influence upon *A Tale*, as argued both by the three editors in their introduction, and Mark Philip in the book's second chapter. Although Dickens declares in *A Tale's* preface that "no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book" (p. 27), over the course of the novel he instead regularly counters Carlyle's conservative belief that the French Revolution was the bestial, but logical, end-product of a rotten eighteenth-century French society. Instead, the authors show how Dickens often employs a liberal ambivalence about the progression of the French Revolution, especially during the period of the Terror.

The two chapters also confront the second dismissing critique that historians often level against the book: that it tells far more about British politics than it does about the French. Jones, McDonagh and Mee describe how *A Tale* has remained far less popular in France than much of Dickens' other work, both during his lifetime and since. The book is often described as part of a Francophobic tradition among Anglophone writers on the French Revolution stretching from Edmund Burke's *1790 Reflections on the Revolution in France* to at least Simon Schama's 1989 *Citizens* (pp. 6-7). This occurred in spite of Dickens' regular visits to and speaking engagements in Paris, and of how he treated the Gordon Riots with similar ambivalence in his earlier novel, *Barnaby Rudge*.

But instead of using the British aspects of Dickens' novel to dismiss the work's wider importance, the authors usefully highlight the trans-national nature of Dickens' topic, which both then and now serves as one of the book's more pertinent features. Even after 1830 and 1848, as Philip points out, the French Revolution continued to hold an unmatched place in the British popular imagination, and Dickens is forced to navigate—like all British authors—between condemnations of Burke and the encouragements of Thomas Paine (pp. 31-32). Contemporary issues also appear to have formed part of the backdrop. Dickens began work on the novel in the immediate aftermath of the 1857-1858 Sepoy Rebellion, with some of the largest mass meetings and demonstrations of British Chartism only a decade distant. As history, however, as Michael Wood explains in the volume's "Afterword," *A Tale* still contains significant distortions. Dickens' pernicious influence on students is never greater than when imbuing

them with the idea that the Revolution had to happen. Drawing from multiple nineteenth-century determinisms, Dickens creates a “sturdy tautology” (p. 192) implying the Revolution to be a clear result of Old Regime abuses, which proves unsurprisingly attractive to casual readers.

Attempting to understand Dickens’ views of violence and terror appears to have been the initial object of the project. The papers which form the volume were first given at the Oxford University July 2006 conference, “Charles Dickens and the French Revolution: Crowds and Power” (p. xi). The only chapter to primarily confront this question, however, is Gareth Stedman Jones’ “The Redemptive Powers of Violence?” which compares Dickens’ views on the Revolution and the “People” with Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx—but curiously and without explanation, not with Jules Michelet, who predates Carlyle in making the “French People...the active protagonist of the historical process” (p. 42). Dickens’ ultimate position appears to have been one of ambiguity. While *A Tale* can be read as part of a wider “literature of social fear” (p. 47) of which Carlyle was a chief stylist, Dickens’ liberal sympathies placed much of the blame for popular upheaval upon elites who had been insufficiently sensitive to the populace’s needs. Thus, Dickens’ model winds up halfway between Carlyle’s “volcanic” model and Marx’s economic determinism (p. 55).

Stedman Jones makes a typical twenty-first century historiographical error, however, in trying to constrain Dickens and his contemporaries’ views on popular politics under the narrow heading of “violence.” Although both disgust and fascination with the Revolution’s more violent episodes form an inescapable part of Dickens’ views (and form a not inconsiderable part of the book’s appeal), this only forms part of his growing recognition of the strength and power of popular democracy and broadly based domestic politics—even as he retained a very nineteenth-century British ambivalence about its desirability and saw potential violence as one of the new system’s chief drawbacks. After the first three chapters, the contributors’ writing becomes much more minute, sometimes unhelpfully so. The editors at the end of their introduction loosely characterize the chapters which follow as simply as characteristic of the “variety of responses” that the book has elicited (p. 18). If so, the one intellectual history, three literary essays, and three film studies entries which end the volume could each have profited from the breadth and accessibility of the book’s first three chapters.

The intellectual/literary essays relate *A Tale* to specific trends across the Revolutionary era. Keith Baker offers a “genealogy” of the character of Dr. Manette, placing him within the wider trope of Bastille confinement narratives and “sentimentalized outrage” against royal authority common both before and after 1789 (p. 66). Sally Ledger examines the roll of courtroom drama in Dickens’ literature, partially focusing on Charles Darnay’s trial in *A Tale*, and Dickens’ common trope of seeing court trials as spectacle often divorced from justice. Kamilla Elliott interestingly (but somewhat tangentially) ties the book into her wider study of passport identity descriptions and the Revolutionary era’s intensification of surveillance. John Bowen addresses the book’s relation to matters of democratic “counting” and the troublesome nature of political legitimation. Between the four, we see how *A Tale* ties into widespread critiques of both the Old and New Regime methods of governing within France, and both directly and analogously in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain as well.

The last three chapters turn to theatre and film adaptations of *A Tale*. Joss Marsh examines stagings between 1860 and 1939, particularly examining ambiguities of adaptation. Judith Buchanan and Alex Newhouse explore the 1917 silent film version, tying the subject to American ambivalence over popular mobilization and the First World War, as well as fascination with the developing field of crowd psychology. Charles Barr focuses on the 1935 and 1958 film versions, in which reactions to the Russian Revolution helped lead to more conservative adaptations, in which “mob violence inevitably gets out of hand” (p. 178). With the onset of the Cold War, a tale narrating the inevitability of Revolution went out of style.

Particularly given the book's stated aim to explore the "variety of responses" which the novel has elicited, however, the work could have profited from a wider discussion of audience reception and the book's broad cultural impact. The four intellectual history and literary chapters trace origins of different themes in *A Tale*, but do not relate the book to discussions and debates since its publication. While the three theater and film studies chapters are rich on the minutiae of the staging of different productions, we learn little in detail about their popularity or audience responses. This appears particularly salient given the seeming unpopularity of major productions of *A Tale* over the past fifty years, even during the spate of releases surrounding the French Revolutionary Bicentennial. Placing film productions of *A Tale* in comparison with either notable Francophone works on the Revolution and popular politics, such as Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise*, and Andrej Wajda's *Danton*, or more conservative Anglophone productions such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, could also have been highly instructive.

Befitting the opening chapters, it would have been interesting to follow the book's continued popularity, and attempt to account for its continued salience as both literature and social critique. Beyond the question of its shorter length than most of Dickens' other major works (p. 5), what factors cause the work to continue to be assigned, even in an era when Western classics are in decline as a percentage of the curricula?

Overall, however, the book succeeds well in its declared aim to encourage "readers [to] return with renewed eyes to a landmark text in British cultural history" (p. 18). It could prove highly instructive as an aid for encouraging discussions on the convergence of history, historiography, literature, and theatre and film studies, either between scholars or in the classroom.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh, and Jon Mee, "Introduction: *A Tale of Two Cities* in Context"

Mark Philip, "The New Philosophy: The Substance and the Shadow in *A Tale of Two Cities*"

Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Redemptive Powers of Violence? Carlyle, Marx and Dickens"

Keith Baker, "A Genealogy of Dr. Manette"

Sally Ledger, "From the Old Bailey to Revolutionary France: The Trials of Charles Darnay"

Kamilla Elliot, "Face Value in *A Tale of Two Cities*"

John Bowen, "Counting on: *A Tale of Two Cities*"

Joss Marsh, "Mimi and the Matinee Idol: Martin-Harvey, Sydney Carton, and the Staging of *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1860-1939"

Judith Buchanan and Alex Newhouse, "Sanguine Mirages, Cinematic Dreams: Things Seen and Things Imagined in the 1917 Fox Feature Film *A Tale of Two Cities*"

Charles Barr, "Two Cities, Two Films"

Michel Wood, "Afterword"

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