

## **CHARLES DICKENS READS AT PLYMOUTH CHURCH**

### *Taylor Swift Isn't the First Celebrity to Have Ticket Sales Problems*

On four nights in January 1868, Charles Dickens rented the sanctuary at Plymouth Church to perform dramatic readings from his books. This was not a religious experience – unless you happened to worship Charles Dickens. It was a commercial enterprise created by Dickens and his brilliant theater manager and secretary, George Dolby – and a very successful one.

Dickens had three careers: novelist, journalist and public reader. For the last 12 years of his life he toured Britain and America giving readings of his works to large audiences of over 2,000. The readings were highly dramatic performances in which Dickens' great gift for mimicry allowed him to represent the looks and voices of his characters.

Dickens, although a very successful writer, was at this time fifty-five years old and in poor health. He was motivated by the financial pressures of his immediate and large extended family and the desire to maintain his very comfortable lifestyle by capitalizing on his celebrity status. To accomplish this he gave 76 public readings in 18 U.S. cities to earn more than \$3 million in today's dollars over the six month tour. [1]

The tour included cities in the Northeast U.S.: Boston, New York, Philadelphia and 14 other cities. He had scheduled presentations for 22 evenings at Steinway Hall in Manhattan. Then Dolby, his agent and manager, started casting his eye for a venue in Brooklyn, still a separate city at that time. The Brooklyn Academy was too large, the Atheneum was too small, so why not Plymouth Church?

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[1] Martin, Jillian, "Making it in America: How Charles Dickens and His Cunning Manager George Dolby Made Millions from a Performance Tour of The United States, 1867-1868." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2014.

Dickens made arrangements to secure the space “courtesy of the reverend gentleman,” Henry Ward Beecher. [2]

Four nights of readings were scheduled:

Thursday, 1/16/1868 - Christmas Carol, The Trial from Pickwick

Friday, 1/17/1868 - David Copperfield, Mr. Bob Sawyer’s Party (*from Pickwick*)

Monday, 1/20/1868 - Doctor Marigold, The Trial from Pickwick

Tuesday, 1/21/1868 - Nicholas Nickleby, Boots at the Jolly Tree Inn

### **Ticket Sales**

After securing Plymouth, Dicken’s agent Dolby was immediately faced with the problem of deciding on how to sell tickets for seating in the pews. In normal circumstances Dolby would simply decide how few or many tickets to sell per person. But the problem with a church space arranged in pews each varying in its holding capacity was new to him. One option they considered was to charge a fixed price of \$2 per pew seat as a reserved price and then sell the premium, best positions by auction. But Dickens objected, concerned with the perception of profiteering by him. So they made the decision to sell all the seats at \$2.

This was not a great idea. This decision resulted in massive ticket scalping by “the noble army of speculators,” as Dickens described them, and they came out in great force. Tickets were to go on sale at Plymouth on Orange Street as early as ten the night before they went on sale. The night was very cold and frosty and “during the whole night the [assembled group] kept up an enormous bonfire in the street, sleeping around it in turns on their mattresses, and enjoying their supper of bread-and-meat, with potations of Bourbon whiskey.

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[2] Dolby, George, *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him* (London: T F Unwind, 1885), p. 209

Early in the morning, and just about daybreak, a body of police appeared on the scene, an idea having suddenly occurred to them that in a narrow street, composed entirely of wooden houses, a bonfire was a source of considerable danger to the whole of that part of the city.”[3]

When Dolby arrived at the doors of Plymouth on Orange Street with the tickets at 8 AM there were over 200 people waiting to buy tickets. He and his staff were greeted with catcalls. Dolby, perhaps a little theatrically, describes the mele he found from the evening before:

“... The police made a raid on the bonfire, the mattresses, and speculators, and a terrific combat ensued, in which the people farthest off in the line took the most prominent part, until they saw that those nearest the door were being routed, and then with broken heads and bleeding noses rushed into the good places, bringing with them their mattresses, and hanging on to the iron railings round the church to keep possession of the places they had so gallantly fought for. The New Yorkers got the worst of the fight and the Brooklyn men got the best of the tickets.”[4] Many arrests were made.

Needless to say, many speculators did well. According to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, “Judging from the placards that adorn scores of windows on our principal street, there are many tickets for sale in the hands of speculators or friends.”[5] Some scalpers were able to resell their two dollar tickets for ten to twenty dollars.[6] But some of the speculators got stuck with unsold seats that they could not unload at the last minute.

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[3] *Ibid* p. 210

[4] *Ibid* p. 211

[[5] “Charles Dickens Tonight”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1868, p. 2

[6] “Dickens Readings - The Sale of Tickets This Morning”, *Brooklyn Union*, January 9, 1868, p. 4

## **Staging the Readings**

Since the reading was to be in the church sanctuary, unusual means had to be resorted to in order to render the platform usable by Dickens. Beecher's reading desk was in the way and had to be removed – alterations which Mr. Beecher obligingly allowed to be made. His olive-wood desk and chair were put away in a closet.

Dickens provided his own furniture, and his taste ran to one color – red. “He has a red screen, a red table, and a book that is read.... Dickens declined the assistance of the big organ; he prefers to read without accompaniment.”[7]

When everything was ready Mr. Dickens came on the stage, and after informing the audience what he was going to read proceeded to business. Librettos were sold in the house so that you could follow Dickens' reading.

Although an enormous building and capable of holding over two thousand people, Mr. Dickens pronounced it to be perfect. At the close of the last reading Dickens entered the waiting room, back of the pulpit, where he found Henry Ward Beecher sitting alone, and, in the pleasant interview that followed, advised Mr. Beecher never to leave the church, as its acoustic advantages excelled those in any edifice in which he had ever read. [8]

## **The Critics**

Before he started his American tour Dickens was said to have practiced 3 hours a day with his pronunciation with the alphabet allowing him to attain his purity

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[7] “Corry O’Lanus’ Epistle – All Things Dickens”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1868, p. 2

[8] “Was His First Visit Here Signalized by a Reception”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 9, 1890, p. 17

and pronunciation of the language which pleased his American audiences. “For an Englishman he speaks our language very correctly.”[9]

Of his Steinway Hall readings in Manhattan, The New York Times said “...the audience was spellbound...” and “...went away declaring that never before had they experienced so rich a literary treat.... He recited his work without looking at the page, from memory. The performance evoked tears from the audience, particularly during Dickens’ rendition of Tiny Tim’s famous concluding toast in *A Christmas Carol*, ‘God bless us, everyone!’”[10]

Mark Twain was an admirer of Dickens’ writing but not of his speaking style stating “He is a bad reader, in one sense – because he does not enunciate his words sharply and distinctly – he does not cut the syllables cleanly, and therefore many of them fell dead before they reached our part of the house... I was a good deal disappointed in Mr. Dickens’ reading.”[11]

Corry O’Lanus, a columnist in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* who attended a reading at Plymouth said that Dickens gave his audience better measure than most of our lecturers and readers. He went on to say:

"He read for two hours, so the entertainment costs only a dollar an hour. Plymouth is a good place to read in. There is not another place of amusement in the city, except Hooley’s Opera House, where you can hear so well. [Plymouth] is admirably adapted for light entertainment which does not require scenery or much stage rooms such as readings, concerts or sparring exhibitions.

Some people think that when you go into a church that a feeling of reverence must creep over you and you must be sedate and solemn. This is not the case

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[9]“Corry O’Lanus’ Epistle – All Things Dickens”, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1868, p. 2

[10] “Mr. Dickens’ First Reading” *New York Times*, December 10, 1867

[11] “Did Mark Twain and Charles Dickens Ever Meet”, [www.airshipfamel.com/2014/10/08](http://www.airshipfamel.com/2014/10/08)

with Plymouth Church the associations of which are the free and easy sort; men wear their hats, ladies use opera glasses and talk and laugh as freely as they would in the Academy of Music at a Philharmonic rehearsal.

There is no restraint on the premises. Whatever sanctity there may be in the establishment is movable like Mr. Beecher's reading desk and can be laid aside at convenience; and the edifice is like one of those ingenious pieces of furniture which can be converted at pleasure from a bedstead into a dining table or washstand. It can be turned from a church into a place of amusement at the shortest notice.

The pew seats are more comfortable than the chairs at the Academy. The ushers are quite intelligent and occasionally of some assistance to persons looking for their seats.

I was well pleased with Plymouth Church, its accommodations are excellent. It has the smartest preacher, the biggest organ, and offers a greater variety of entertainments during the season than any church in the city.

If it were not for the prejudices of Mrs. O'Lanus who prefers her religion and amusements separate, I should have bid for a pew at the recent auction.

Yours serenely,  
Corry O'Lanus [12]"

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[12]"Corry O'Lanus' Epistle - All Things Dickens", *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1868, p. 2

After Brooklyn, Dickens continued his tour to Philadelphia, Washington, upstate New York, and Boston before ending the tour again in New York at Steinway Hall. At the completion of his triumphant tour in the U.S., Dickens returned home to England on April 20, 1868. The tour had taken a big toll on his health but he resumed his hectic reading schedule in England, Ireland, and Scotland despite his health problems. He died on June 9, 1870, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. He considered his U.S. tour one of the highlights of his career.

~Norm Jones