

Charles Dickens on More. ★

THE following citation is extracted from an address delivered by Charles Dickens to the Printers' Pension Society on 4 April 1843 (K.J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 38-9 :

I now give 'The Press', that wonderful lever Archimedes wished for, and which *has* moved the world ! which has impelled it onward in the path of knowledge, of mercy, and of human improvement so far that nothing in the world can ever roll it back ! [*Loud applause.*] The mass of the people, said Dr. Johnson very truly, in any country where printing is unknown, must be barbarous ; and Sir Thomas More, the best, and wisest, and the greatest of men, who, before the press was established, died what was almost the natural death of the good, and the wise and the great -- Sir Thomas More so clearly saw into futurity, and descried from afar off the stupendous influence of the press, that he went out of his way to set up a printing-press in Utopia, knowing that without it even the people of that fancied land would not bear competition in the course of years with the real nations of the earth. [*Cheers.*] If they looked back only for two hundred years, to that time when the Dutch citizen carved letters on the bark of the beechen tree, and took off impressions of them on paper as toys to please his grand-children -- he little knew the wonderful agent which, in scarcely a century, was about to burst on mankind ; what a strong engine in the course of time it must become, even in the land where the ruthless vices and crimes of the annointed ruffian who spread More's bloody pillow were to acquire him an immortality of infamy. [*cheers*]

The same collection of speeches contains an address which Dickens gave on 5 October 1843, during a brilliant *soirée* in Manchester's

Free Trade Hall. The purpose was to save the Athenaeum founded in 1835 and now in danger of being dissolved. Disraeli and all the local celebrities were present. Dickens presided. Our excerpt comes from p. 48 of the printed text :

The man who lives from day to day by the daily exercise in his sphere of hand or head, and seeks to improve himself in such a place as the Athenaeum, acquires for himself that property of soul which has in all times upheld struggling men in every degree, but self-made men especially and always. [*Applause.*] He secures to himself that faithful companion which, while it has ever lent the light of its countenance to men of rank and eminence who have deserved it, has ever shed its brightest consolations on men of low estate and almost hopeless means. [*Applause.*] It took its patient seat beside Sir Walter Raleigh in his dungeon-study in the Tower ; and it laid its head upon the block with More. But it did not disdain to watch the stars with Ferguson, the shepherd's boy ; it walked the streets in mean attire with Crabbe ; it was a poor barber here in Lancashire with Arkwright ; it was a tallow-chandler's son with Franklin ; it worked at shoemaking with Bloomfield in his garret ; it followed the plough with Burns ; and, high above the noise of loom and hammer, it whispers courage, even at this day, in ears that I could name in Sheffield and Manchester. ¹ [*Loud applause.*]

1. Of the less easily remembered of these, James Ferguson (1710-76), the astronomer, Sir Richard Arkwright (1782-92), the inventor of textile machinery, and Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823), author of the poem *The Farmer's Boy*, like the others, were self-taught men.

★ The references were discovered by *amica* Constance Smith of St. Louis University, who copied the text for us.

Postscript.

To complete the book's footnote : Dickens, only 31, was already famous and had lectured in the U.S.A. His sister Fanny Elizabeth (1810-48), wife of Henry Burnett, lived in Manchester. More's other companions in Dickens' roll of honour : Raleigh (1552 ? -1618) ; the poet George Crabbe (1754-1832) ; the statesman, author and inventor Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) ; Scotland's poet Robert Burns (1759-96).