Charles Dickens’ continuing influence upon the 20th century popular imagination about educational conditions in the 19th century is curious yet understandable. For many years he has figured in school text books as a source of colourful illustrations of early Victorian social history. His entertainment value meanwhile is still unsurpassed, while his ‘Nicholas Nickleby’ continues in popularity not only in literature but now also on radio, film and television. Entertainment apart however, it is curious how the Dickens’ impressions are used without qualification in specialist works in the history of education.¹ We do not suggest for one moment that Dickens, who continued with his incomparable talents as a novelist the zeal of the reformer and the instincts of the newspaper reporter, should be entirely discarded as a contemporary source now that in the 20th century we have access to new and more efficient types of historiography. What we do propose however is some fresh empirical verification and assessment of the Dickens verdict and approach.

Born in 1812, Dickens lived in Chatham until about 1823 and spent the next ten years in London. ‘Nicholas Nickleby’ was first published in monthly parts from April 1838 to October 1839 and the novel was first issued in book form in October 1839. In the Preface, the author explains that he came to hear about Yorkshire schools when a ‘not very robust child.’ His first impressions of them (probably through newspaper reports) were ‘somehow or other connected with a suppurated abscess that some boy had come home with, in consequence of his Yorkshire guide, philosopher, and friend, having ripped it open with an inky pen-knife.’ This story stuck with him ever after and he determined one day to follow it up in a report to

¹ In his History of Education in Great Britain (1965) S. J. Curtin uses Dotheboys Hall as an exemplar of the “terrible conditions” of the private schools. (see page 234)
the public at large. ‘Nicholas Nickleby’ was commenced within a few months after
the publication of the completed ‘Pickwick Papers’ which must have been in 1837. Dickens insists in his Preface, that Mr. Squeers, the Yorkshire headmaster, and his
school, ‘are faint and feeble pictures of an existing reality, purposely subdued, and
kept down lest they should be deemed impossible.’ His evidence for his belief that
he had under-written rather than over-written his story came from accounts of
atrocities on neglected children supplied from private quarters far beyond the
reach of suspicion or distrust and from past reporting of trials at law ‘in which
damages have been sought an a poor recompense for lasting agonies and
disfigurements inflicted on children.’ He explains that he had resolved, had he seen
occasion, ‘to reprint a few of these details of legal proceedings from certain old
newspapers’. Unfortunately Dickens did not divulge much more about these
private sources.

Dickens was obviously previously prepared when he made a personal visit to
Yorkshire one very severe winter (probably that of 1837-8). Wishing to avoid notice
as the celebrated author of Pickwick Papers he ‘concerted a pious fraud’ with a
professional friend who had a Yorkshire connection. The friend supplied Dickens
with letters of introduction in a fictitious name. They referred ‘to a supposititious
little boy who had been left with a widowed mother who didn’t know what to do
with him; the poor lady had thought, as a means of thawing the tardy compassion
of her relations in his behalf, of sending him to a Yorkshire school; I was the poor
lady’s friend travelling that way; and if the recipient of the letter could inform me
of a school in the neighbourhood, the writer would be very much obliged.’ After
Dickens had obtained local information in this manner he returned to Kent and
completed his book at the age of 25 or 26.

The publication of ‘Nicholas Nickleby’ in 1838 caused considerable indignation
among many Yorkshire people who regarded the story as an unjust indictment. At
the same time it prompted public outrage and demands for immediate action in the
interest of children. An intensive official survey of the West Riding of Yorkshire in

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2 An account of these reactions is contained in Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education*, 1965
the late 1850s was conducted by J. G. Fitch, the Assistant Commissioner to the Newcastle Commission. He reported: 'I have wholly failed to discover any example of the typical Yorkshire boarding-school with which Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby has made us familiar. I have seen schools in which board and education were furnished for £20 and even £18 per annum, but have been unable to find evidence of bad feeding or physical neglect.'

Due regard should be paid to the fact that this government report was made twenty years after the prototype of Dotheboys Hall existed. The public shock associated with the publication of 'Nicholas Nickleby' could have caused subsequent closures of the worst schools. This indeed is suggested in a Preface to a later edition written in 1848. Referring to the fact that the book was written ten years previously just after Pickwick, Dickens observes in retrospect: “There were, then, a good many cheap Yorkshire schools in existence. There are very few now… I make mention of the race of Schoolmasters as of the Yorkshire schoolmasters, in the past tense. Although it has not yet finally disappeared, it is dwindling daily.”

If Fitch’s report cannot strictly be taken to contradict Dickens’ view of the 1830s it is still to be considered as an indication of conditions of the 1850s, especially in the light of Dickens’ corroborative comments concerning the large number of extinctions by then of bad schools and teachers. Notice that private fee-paying schools were still in the 1850s the main agency of education throughout the country.

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3 *Schools Inquiry Commission* (for 1858) 1861, Vol. I, p.32. Fitch’s remarks are also quoted in S. J. Curtis op. cit.

4 In the Introduction by Charles Dickens the Younger to an edition of 1892 (Macmillan), there is reference to a story (in the Dickens biography by C. W. Cope) from the driver of a stagecoach between Darlington and Barnard Castle who stated that Dickens ruined a school master by the name of Shaw who was alleged to be the prototype of Squeers. The coachman stoutly denied that Squeers’ (Shaw’s) boys were half-starved and explained that Dickens obtained his story dismissed usher; ‘it was a poisoned source’. Charles Dickens junior dismissed the idea that an actual prototype of Squeers existed. He also objected to evidence from ‘unnamed stage-coachmen and other witnesses of similar nebulosity.’ He would have been on stronger ground however if the witnesses of Charles Dickens Senior were not similarly ‘unnamed’.

5 Those schools that accepted subsidies had also to accept inspection. In this sense there was an element of ‘publicness’ about them. In the 1851 census they were indeed classified as ‘public schools’, but they were still privately owned and continued to charge fees. The main point we wish to emphasise is that they were entirely a different type of organisation from the state schools of today.
Whatever the validity of Dickens’ account of the early 19th century schools of the ‘Dotheboys’ kind it could never seriously begin to qualify as a representative of private schooling in this period - that is of nearly the whole of early 19th century English education. The Wackford Squeers establishment was a sample of one particular class of school only: the full board school. The vast majority of schools at this time were day schools. The large quantity of new schools which appeared in the Industrial Revolution made their biggest debut not in the remote parts of the country but in the growing towns. They did so moreover in such numbers as to encourage abundant competition and therefore rapid transit between families and others of daily information about them. The Dickens prototype moreover was a subset of its own class. ‘Dotheboys Hall’ advertised ‘No Vacations’ suggesting that it was being used purposefully and specially as a place for sending orphans, illegitimates and generally unwanted children from all parts of England like the ‘supposititious little boy’ in Dickens’ own letter of introduction.

Despite these observations Dickens, in his writing, seems to have been speaking for English education as a whole. He did so too in a way which suggested strong Benthamite predilections and overtones. In his later Preface to ‘Nickleby’ he wrote: “Of the monstrous neglect of education in England and the disregard of it by the State as a means of forming good or bad citizens and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example”. Dickens made no secret of the fact that his interests in education could in his own times be classed an partisan. Favouring compulsory, ‘comprehensive’ unsectarian and state provided education, he was a ready speaker to popular audiences on the subject.

Whether when he was writing ‘Nickleby’ Dickens had access to or studied closely the systematic surveys of schooling made by the Statistical Societies of Manchester and the other big industrial centres is doubtful. Had he done so his grasp of the total educational situation would have been more comprehensive and

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6 Compare this sentence with James Mill's remark that "...the question whether the people should be educated, is the same with the question whether they should be happy or miserable".
7 C. Birchenough. History of Elementary Education in England and Wales. 1920 p.66.
more in perspective. Yet interestingly enough these same sources would have afforded much colourful and anecdotal material upon which the fertile and creative mind of such a novelist might well have worked.

There is indeed much material in the reporting of the statistical investigators upon the quality of some selected schools which, has a considerable and unconscious ‘Dickensian’ flavour. Most of our quotations will be taken from the Report on Manchester in 1834. We should be careful to note however that in several respects Manchester was different from other English industrial towns and not least because of a significant proportion of recent Irish immigrants in its population. The fact that over one-sixth of the family heads were, Irish was partly attributed by the statistical society the circumstance that Manchester, unlike some other towns gave relief to the Irish out of the poor rate. Proper study of the Manchester Report serves to illustrate the difficulty of steering a course between a balanced descriptive impression of school conditions (which in a large number of cases were certainly wretched) and a temptation to be carried away by the more lurid, spectacular and ‘rumbustious’ individual instances. We are sometime apt to forget that reports written in earnest solemnity often tells us as much of their writers as their subject. The following is an ‘incidental’ observation placed in a footnote of the Manchester Statistical Society’s Report on Manchester 1834 (p.10):

“The Committee met with two instances of schools kept by Masters of some abilities, but much given to drinking, who had however gained such a reputation in their neighbourhood, that after spending a week or a fortnight in this pastime they could always fill their schoolrooms again as soon as they returned to their post. The children during the absence of the Masters go to other schools for the week, or play in the streets, or are employed by their parents, in running errands, etc. On another occasion, one of these Instructors and Guardians of the morals of our youth, was met issuing from his school room at the head of his scholars to see a fight in the neighbourhood; and instead of stopping to reply to any educational queries, only uttered a breathless invitation to come along and see the sport.”
In another footnote (page 9) we discover our Manchester Investigator coolly attempting to put his questions to a master in a common school who was simultaneously in charge of a large class and studiously reporting the result as follows:

"In one of these seminaries of learning, where there were about 130 children, the noise and confusion was no great as to render the replies of the Master to the enquiries put to him totally inaudible; he made several attempts to obtain silence but without effect; at length, as a last effort, he ascended his desk, and striking it forcibly with a ruler, said, in a strong Hibernian accent "I'll tell you what it is, boys, the first I hear make a noise, I'll call him up, and kill entirely!" and then perceiving probably on the countenance of his visitor some expression of dismay at this murderous threat, he added quickly in a more subdued tone, “almost I will.” His menace produced no more effect than his previous appeals had done. A dead silence succeeded for a minutes or two; then the whispering recommenced, and the talking, shuffling of feet, and general disturbance was soon as bad an ever.”

The writer does not make it entirely clear whether all 130 boys wore in the same room. If this was so then the case must have been very exceptional since the Manchester Statistical Society’s figures showed an average pupil teacher ratio of 1 to 34 for the 179 common schools. (The average ratio for Manchester, Bury, Salford, York, Birmingham and Liverpool was 26.8).

The Manchester Dame Schools for children from two years upwards afforded probably some of the most ‘Dickensian’ examples of all. The contemporary relative poverty showed up here in several aspects. Often mainly acting as child-minding enterprises the Dame schools allowed parents the opportunity to earn bigger incomes for the family. This function was combined with rudimentary attempts at instruction especially in reading and sewing. When assessing these schools it is as well to remember that they contained large numbers below the age of five, an age group for which even in 1970 the England state system still makes hardly my
school provision at all. Many Dame schools were found in ‘dirty’ and ‘unwholesome’ rooms – how much more unwholesome and dirty than the typical dwelling of the time is not discoverable. Certainly by 20th century standards the physical conditions of Manchester were grim:

"In one of these schools eleven children were found, in a small room which one of the children of the Mistress was lying in bed ill of the measles. Another child had died in the same room of the same complaint a few days before; and no less than thirty of the usual scholars were then confined at home with the same disease."

School furniture and books were often a luxury:

"In another school all the children to the number of twenty, were squatted upon the bare floor there being no benches, chairs, or furniture of any kind, in the room. The Master said his terms would not yet allow him to provide forms, but he hoped that an his school increased, and his circumstances thereby improved, he should be able sometime or other to afford this luxury."

Some of the teachers could not make a living wage out of such teaching and had to augment it with other employment such as shop keeping, sewing and washing. Of all the graphic footnotes in the Manchester Report for 1834 (p.6) the following to the most poignant and bizarre:

"One of the best of these schools is kept by a blind man who hears his scholars their lessons, and explains them with great simplicity; he is however liable to interruption in his academic labours, as his wife keeps a mangle, and he is obliged to turn it for her."

The Birmingham Statistical Society reported that:

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8 Manchester Report (p.6)
9 Ibid
"The physical condition of the dame schools of Birmingham is much more satisfactory than could have been anticipated. None of them are kept in cellars, very few in garrets or bedrooms, and they are generally more cleanly and better lighted than schools of the same description in Manchester and Liverpool."

Forty-four per cent, of the Birmingham dame school scholars were under five years old. Clearly anxious to enquire about the moral and religious aspects of the teaching, the investigators were often taken aback by the replies:

'A mistress in one of this class of schools, on being asked whether she gave moral instruction to her scholars, replied, "No, I can't afford it for 3d. a week."

Another replied:

"How is it likely, when they can hardly say their A, B, C?"

In only 21 out of 267 schools was 'moral instruction' professed to be attended to, The investigators were similarly disappointed with their performance in religious instruction and with the fact that in 229 schools the Church Catechism was repeated only once a week.

The Birmingham Statistical Society also regretted inefficient moral and religious instruction in the common day schools for older children, typically from 5 years to 12 years.

"Taken as a whole, the utmost amount of benefit which accrues to the public from this class of schools will include facility in reading and writing, and some knowledge of arithmetic."
Those who always seek relative judgements as distinct from those who regard all discrepancies between the real and the ideal (Utopian) as inefficiencies will keep a firm comparative grasp of such Dickensian descriptions as the following:

“We noted the grim approaches ... rubbish dumps on waste land nearby; the absence of green playing spaces on or near the school sites; tiny play grounds; gaunt looking children; often poor decorative conditions inside; narrow passages; dark rooms ... books kept unseen in cupboards for lack of space to lay them out ... and sometime all around, the ingrained grime of generations.”

It is not from a desire to be excessively slick but from an almost urgent respect for the need for due perspective that we now explain that this last quotation comes not from the 1830s but from paragraph 133 of the English Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools (1967). One must say immediately that this passage refers only to the worst areas of English schooling today and that improvement plans are already afoot. It serves to show nevertheless the need for comparative institutional judgment, i.e. a comparison of past imperfections with present ones and not with some unattainable ideal. It illustrates also the way in which selective qualitative quotations unbacked by statistical perspective can at all times seriously mislead and how especially necessary it is to exercise appropriate care when interpreting the evidence of the past.

Several of the local and national reports on 19th century schooling were particularly critical of the frequent lack of credentials among teachers. The only qualification for the employment of so many teachers, complained the Manchester Report, was their unfitness for any other. Such remarks were often inconsistent; for the same investigators later complained that many teachers wore continuing the job of teaching with other occupations, (for which they are clearly fitted). They now objected that such teachers were inefficient because they were dissipating their energies. Later in the century in the Newcastle Commission Report of 1861, one observer protested that so many teachers had ‘picked up’ their knowledge ‘promiscuously’ or were continuing the trade of school-keeping with another:
'Of the private school masters in Devonport, one had been a blacksmith and afterwards an exciseman, another was a journey-man tanner, a third a clerk in a solicitor's office, a fourth (who was very successful in preparing lads for the competitive examination in the dockyards) keeps an evening school and works as a dockyard labourer, a fifth was a seaman, and others had been engaged in other callings.'

Another observer found among the teachers, grocers, linen-drappers, tailors, attorneys, painters, Germans Polish and Italian refugees, bakers, widows or daughters of clergymen, barristers, surgeons, housekeepers and dressmakers.

We have commented elsewhere that while the average small boy would today probably display wistful wonder at the prospect of having such a colourful variety of experienced adults to each him the 19th century investigator and commentator saw them as a collection of uncolleged, and therefore untrained, individuals with little redeeming qualities of possible benefit in the schoolroom. Our comparative institutional approach requires a comparison with the products of the Victorian teacher training colleges that eventually did begin to emerge. These colleges have subsequently described by one writer as 'pendant factories, whose machinery efficiently removed whatever traces of interest in human culture the scholars had somehow picked up earlier in their careers.' Rote-learning frequently became the passage way through to the teaching profession via these new 'seminaries of learning as they were often called.

Dickens, with the aid of his inimitable literary talent, made full display of the complaint about lack of teacher qualifications:

"Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examinations or qualification, to open a school anywhere; although preparations for the functions he undertook, was

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12 Newcastle Commission Report 1861, p.93
13 ibid, p.94
14 Education and the State, p.167
required in the surgeon who assisted to bring a boy into the world, or might one day assist, perhaps, to send him out of it, in the chemist, the attorney, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker; the whole round of crafts and trades, the schoolmaster excepted; and although schoolmasters as a race were blockheads and impostors who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and to flourish in it; these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten round in the whole ladder.”

The implication of Dickens’ complaint that typical teachers were ‘without examinations or qualification’ or that his only qualification for the occupation was his unfitness for any other, was that teachers should be properly instructed and examined in teacher training establishments. By the 1850s such agitation was at last resulting in the creation of an increasing number of such institutions. Their products, however, were then ridiculed by Dickens with at least the same vitriolic indignation an he had previously bestowed upon the untrained. In his *Hard Times* published in 1854 his first paragraph describes the instructor of teachers, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind:

‘Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else ... Stick to Facts, Sir!’

Mr McChoakumchild, the new teacher, proceeded to copy the master in his bent manner.

‘He and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately trained at the same time in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte paces and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and levelling, vocal music, and drawing

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16 Second Preface to Nicholas Nickleby
from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers... Ah rather
overdone Mr. McChoakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less how
infinitely better he might have taught more!'