Launching *The Daily News* (1845–46)

Dickens’s predicament as he foresaw the close of the *Chuzzlewit* serial was serious: the publishing depression continued, sales were disappointing, money was still owing to Chapman & Hall. His thoughts returned once more to the idea of a miscellany, the establishment of a periodical in which he would share much greater and more permanent profits than those available to an author of individual books. The printers Bradbury and Evans, to whom he was secretly planning to transfer his publishing affairs, were keen to build on their success as publishers of *Punch*. But, he told Forster in November 1843, he was ‘afraid of a magazine – just now.’ The time and chances of success were not right, and Dickens was also tired, and ‘afraid of putting myself before the town as writing tooth and nail for bread, headlong, after the close of a book taking so much out of one as *Chuzzlewit*.’ His main fear of any project was of being ‘forced (as in the *Clock*) to put myself into it, in my old shape.’ The elusive editorial cum managerial role he sought was proving hard to pin down, and the only alternative was escape: ‘to some place which I know beforehand to be CHEAP,’ and to ‘enlarge my stock of description and observation by seeing countries new to me.’

I

Grand thoughts of running a newspaper had been in his head immediately on his return from America, when he wrote two remarkable letters to the elderly Whig doyenne, Lady Holland, proposing himself as the very man to take over the recently-defunct *Courier* newspaper. The plan is remarkable for revealing that, however much emphasis he and contemporaries would later place on the principle of press freedom from political collusion, in 1842 he saw no obstacle to requesting both ‘countenance’ and ‘direct pecuniary assistance’ from the Whig party and the Reform Club as the *sine qua non* of proceeding. Dickens’s impulsive but not altogether Bottom-like presentation of his credentials to Lady Holland is also significant, bearing
in mind the scepticism with which commentators have on the whole viewed his later involvement with The Daily News:

I need scarcely say, that if I threw my small person into the breach, and wrote for the paper (literary articles as well as political) I could command immediate attention; while the influence I have with Booksellers and Authors would give me a better chance of stamping it with a new character, and securing it, after a reasonable trial, good advertisements, than almost any other man could possess.3

Lady Holland was instructed to ‘ascertain the sentiments’ of Melbourne and Lord Lansdowne; for his part, Dickens was prepared to tackle E. J. Stanley, and ‘one or two others’ in his confidence that he ‘could establish an organ for the party which would do good service.’ The answers – negative – came back quickly enough, and in writing to thank Lady Holland for her trouble, Dickens complained of a characteristic lack of boldness among the Liberal leaders. Conscious that Lady Holland knew him only as the ‘Boz’ of Nickleby and later writings, he then expatiated on his journalistic background in a simile that again forges links between the press and the railways, before indicating, with appropriate nods to satirical and essayistic traditions, how his breeding lent itself to instinctive media savvy:

The notion of this newspaper was bred in me by my old training – I was as well acquainted with the management of one, some years ago, as an Engineer is, with a Steam engine. And I always feel when I take up a paper now (which is not often) that the subjects which all the writers leave unhandled (except Fonblanque, who is another Swift) are exactly the questions which interest the people, and concern their business and bosoms most.4

Without a newspaper or magazine at his disposal, Dickens was an engine driver without a locomotive.

II

When Italy was finally settled on as the country in which Dickens would combine virtuous economies with regular leader or letter-writing for the Chronicle, Dickens and Forster summoned Bradbury and Evans to a ‘council’ of war. Chapman and Hall’s ‘mismanaging’ of the expenses of publishing A Christmas Carol had finally convinced Dickens that their happy relationship was irredeemably ‘past and over.’ The meeting was held, and in it, Forster proleptically recalled, ‘lay the germ of another newspaper enterprise he permitted himself to engage in twelve months later, to which he would have done more wisely to have ... answered No.’