

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) visited North America at the age of 30. He has been considered a possible author of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," although this notion was rejected by Salomon as unlikely. It is, however, somewhat amazing that his "Notes for General Circulation" should be found in The Pittsfield Sun, a major source of the Maynard legend of 1845.

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Dickens in America

From "American Notes for General Circulation."

NIAGARA FALLS.

We called at the town of Erie, at eight o'clock that night, and lay there an hour. Between five and six next morning we arrived at Buffalo, where we breakfasted; and being too near the Great Falls to rest patiently any where else, we set off by train, the same morning at nine o'clock, to Niagara.

It was a miserable day; chilly and raw; a damp mist falling; and the trees in that northern region quite bare and wintry. Whenever the train halted, I listened for the roar; and was constantly straining my eyes in the direction where I knew the Falls must be, from seeing the river rolling on toward them, every moment expecting to behold the spray. Within a few minutes of our stopping, not before, I saw two great white clouds rising up slowly and majestically from the depths of the earth. That was all. At length we alighted; and then for the first time, I heard the mighty rush of wa'er, and felt the ground tremble underneath my feet.

The bank is very steep, and was slippery with rain, and half-melted ice. I hardly know how I got down, but I was soon at the bottom, and climbing, with two English officers who were crossing and had joined me, over some broken rocks, deafened by the noise, half blinded by the spray, and wet to the skin. We were at the foot of the American Fall. I could see an immense torrent of water tearing headlong down from some great height, but had no idea of shape, or situation or anything but vague immensity.

When we were seated in the little ferry-boat, and were crossing the swoln [sic] river immediately before both cataracts, I began to feel what it was: but I was in a manner stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene. It was not until I came on Table Rock, and looked—Great Heaven! on what a fall of bright green water—that it came upon me in its full might and majesty.

Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one; instant and lasting; of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind: Tranquility; Calm recollections of the Dead; Great Thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness: nothing of Gloom and Terror. Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, forever.

Oh, how the strife and trouble of our daily life receded from my view, and lessened in the distance, during the two memorable days we passed on that enchanted ground. What voices spoke from out the thundering water; what faces, faded from the earth, looked out upon me from its gleaming depths; what Heavenly promise glistened in those angel's tears, the drops of many hues, that showered around, and twined themselves about the gorgeous arches which the changing rainbows made.

I never stirred in all that time from the Canadian side, whither I had gone at first. I never crossed the river again; for I knew there were people on the other shore, and in such a place it is natural to shun strange company. To wander to and fro all day, and see the cataracts from all points of view; to stand upon the edge of the Great Horse Shoe Fall, marking the hurried waters gathering strength as they approach the verge, yet seeming, too, to pause before it shot into the gulf below; to gaze from the river's level up at the torrent as it came streaming down; to climb the neighboring heights and watch it through the trees, and see the wreathing water in the rapids hurrying on to take its fearful plunge; to linger in the shadow of the solemn rocks three miles below; watching the river as, stirred by no visible cause, it heaved and eddied and woke the echoes, being troubled yet, far down beneath the surface, by its giant leap; to have Niagara before me, lighted by the sun and by the moon, and in the day's decline, and as grey evening slowly fell upon it; to look upon it every day, and wake up at night and hear its ceaseless voice; this was enough.

I think of it in every quiet season now; still do those waters roll and leap, and roar and tumble, all day long; still are the rainbows spanning them a hundred feet below. Still, when the sun is on them, do they shine and show like molten gold. Still, when the day is gloomy, do they fall like snow, or seem to crumble away like the from of a great chalk cliff, or roll down the rock like dense white smoke.—But always does this mighty stream appear to die as it comes down, and always from its unfathomable grave arises that tremendous ghost of spray and mist which is never laid; which has haunted this place with the same dread solemnity since Darkness brooded on the deep, and that first flood before the Deluge—Light—came rushing on Creation at the word of God.