

# Nineteenth-Century Prose

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**Grant F. Scott, ed., *The Illustrated Letters of Richard Doyle to His Father, 1842-1843* (Ohio University Press, 2016), 147 pp., \$79.95 cloth.**

The nineteenth century was a golden age of British letter writing. Grant Scott has provided an excellent selection of imaginatively illustrated letters with his annotated edition of fifty-three letters that Richard Doyle sent to his father between July 1842 and December 1843. Doyle, known to his colleagues as “Dicky” Doyle, was the extremely prolific and wildly creative cartoonist and book illustrator. He is best known for his famous cover of *Punch* that featured Mr. Punch and his dog Toby, surrounded by a swarm of comic figures that was used for more than one hundred years. Doyle excelled at drawing fairies and other supernatural creatures, which filled the pages of *Punch*, and appeared in John Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River* (1851) and William Allingham’s *In Fairyland* (1869). Andrew Lang was so enchanted with Doyle’s fairy pictures from *In Fairyland* that he rearranged the illustrations and used them as the basis for his *The Princess Nobody* (1884). Doyle was equally skilled with humorous parodies of society – particularly skewering the English

gentleman, as seen in his illustrations in *The Foreign Tour of Messers Brown, Jones and Robinson* (1854) and William Thackeray’s *The Newcomes* (1855). Scott recognizes Doyle as a skillful artist capable of working in both “High Victorian Social Realism and Fairy-Tale Romanticism” (33).

In chronologically organizing, transcribing, annotating, and reproducing these illustrated letters, Scott’s collection confirms that, prior to Doyle’s seven-year tenure at *Punch*, he was already a “talented and prolific artist” (3). Joining the *Punch* staff in 1843 at age nineteen, Doyle quickly became one of the magazine’s chief graphic artists; but he resigned in 1850 due to *Punch*’s increasingly anti-Catholic attitudes. While Doyle would subsequently illustrate books by Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and Mark Lemon, he would never achieve the popularity that he had with his weekly cartoons in *Punch*.

The majority of these illustrated letters have never been published. Six appeared in Rodney Engen’s *Richard Doyle* (1983). Scott discovered the cache of fifty-one letters at the Morgan Library and Museum after seeing one as part of a 2006 exhibit of illustrated letters. Scott located another two letters in the Folger Library, which had been separated from the original collection. At Doyle’s death in 1883, his elder brother, James, oversaw the estate and gave the letters to Doyle’s nephew, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, with whom Doyle had been close. Arthur Conan Doyle’s son eventually sold them to the Morgan in 1974.

His father, John Doyle, who published political sketches under the initials HB, trained Doyle in the arts at home. In 1842, John Doyle gave his three sons – Richard, Henry, and Charles – the assignment of writing weekly three-page letters describing their observations in London. The letters were submitted on Sunday morning and, in return, their father paid them five shillings a month. However, if they missed an assignment, or the deadline, they were docked a sixpence. Scott speculates that John Doyle created the exercise as a way of preparing his sons for future careers as art critics, portrait painters, or artists for the emerging field of illustrated

magazines. The letters functioned as an apprenticeship for Doyle and provided him with a useful portfolio. Scott observes that the plan worked exceedingly well for Doyle in that his work as an illustrator for *Punch* “dovetails beautifully with his increasingly elaborate work in the letters; that in effect, the one assignment leads directly and organically into the other” (11). The illustrated letters became a series of works in progress from which Doyle could return to and expand upon for his *Punch* illustrations.

While the letters provide Doyle’s opinions about various cultural and political events of the days, the chief value and pleasure of this collection are in Doyle’s increasing skills as an illustrator. The letters show Doyle’s growing concerns about the Chartist unrest, his fascination with Father Theobald Mathew, the popular Irish “Apostle of Temperance,” as well as the young artist’s opinions on other artists of the day. Doyle took great pleasure in attending the Royal Academy exhibitions, especially the 1843 cartoon competition for the decorations of the new Houses of Parliament. Given Doyle’s decision to leave *Punch* because of its anti-Catholic bias, it is curious that the letters do not include a single reference to the family’s Catholicism, or religion in general. Occasionally, Doyle protests that he doesn’t have anything to say in his weekly letters. Yet he is never at a loss for figures to draw. Some of the most satisfying are self-portraits of Doyle at his drawing table. Once he begins his position at *Punch*, Doyle realizes that he has less time to devote to his weekly assignment for his father. The figure of a somewhat menacing Mr. Punch increasingly appears in his letters. In one of Doyle’s final letters, he simply states, “Look upon this picture” (309). What is not addressed in his brief text is richly compensated with his striking, three-page compendium of grotesque figures. As his career at *Punch* takes off, Doyle’s apprenticeship comes to an end. The illustrations that have once appeared in family letters now entertain a much greater public.

Those interested in Richard Doyle or nineteenth-century illustration will find Scott’s volume a rich source of information that clearly shows the evolution of Doyle as a gifted artist and social commentator. Scott

reproduces the illustrated letters followed by a print version, which make for more accessible reading. The volume reproduces Doyle’s letters in black and white; it also provides a smaller selection of the letters in color.

With the increasing academic attention being given to nineteenth-century book illustration, popular press, children’s literature, and Victorian fairy painting, Scott’s collection of these illustrated letters will encourage a much needed reassessment of Doyle’s reputation as a significant Victorian graphic artist.

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