



Charles Dickens spent the equivalent of £15,000 a year in today's money on alcohol, a professor has said

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Charles Dickens teased teetotalers in newly found letter

While the author enjoyed a drink, he supported an abstinence campaign run by his friend — though not before poking fun

[Jack Malvern](#)

Thursday February 29 2024, 7.30pm, The Times

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Charles Dickens was so fond of drink that he would put away a pint of champagne during intermissions in his talks and kept a cellar of 500 bottles at his home. So scholars were surprised to discover a previously unknown letter by the author in which he lends his support to a society of teetotal Welshmen.

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fully behind its campaign for abstinence.

The author gently mocked the society with a toast he said he would have made if he had been able to attend.

Writing on March 1, 1842, when he was in America on a speaking tour, Dickens said that it was with great regret that he had to go to Philadelphia rather than attend the celebrations of the society in New York.

“Under any other circumstance it would have afforded Mrs Dickens and myself pure gratification to have been among you,” he wrote. “Let me assure you most cordially that it would have been a real pleasure to me to have shared in your temperate festivities; and that I have a high respect for the great objects which your Society promotes.”

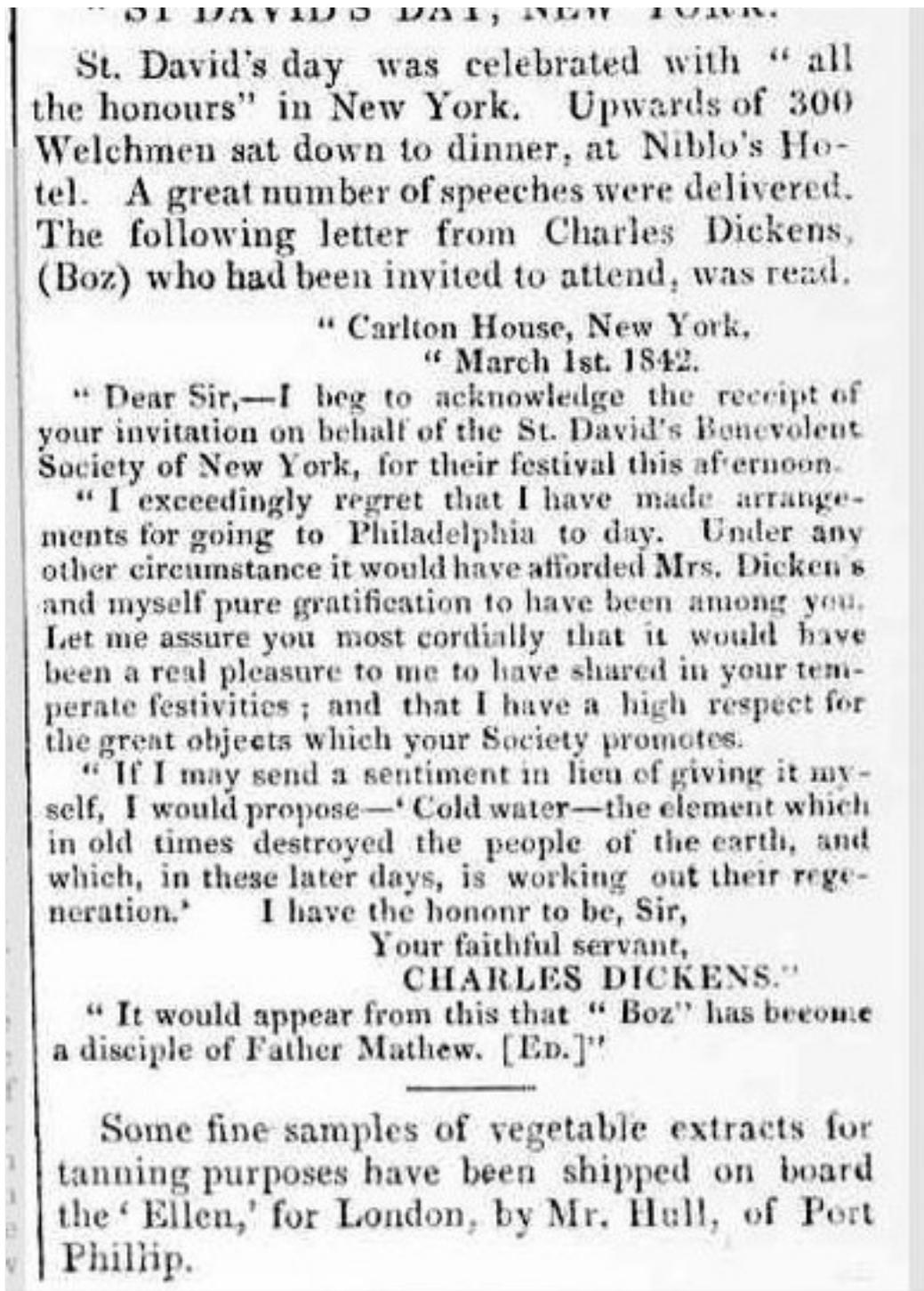
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He proposed that David Cadwallader Colden, the society’s president, make a toast on his behalf with a glass of water: “Cold water — the element which in old times destroyed the people of the earth, and which, in these later days, is working out their regeneration.”

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The letter, which was reprinted in an Australian newspaper

Dr Leon Litvack, editor of the Dickens Letters Project at Queen's University Belfast, said that the toast, which referred to the biblical flood, was affectionate mockery.

Dickens was "a merry drinker" who spent the equivalent of £15,000 a year in today's money on alcohol and who believed

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intermission at his public readings he would drink a pint of champagne to restore himself, if he was feeling sluggish. He was able to hold his liquor very well.”

Dickens was “very much against teetotalism” and wrote an essay criticising the illustrator George Cruikshank, who had worked on Dickens’s books, for rewriting a fairy story to promote abstinence and “prohibition of the sale of spiritous liquors”.

Litvack said: “It was a kind of wokery of the 19th century. I think he thought telling people not to drink was patronising and people had a right to enjoy themselves.”

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Dickens referred to the biblical flood in his letter as he said that water 'destroyed the people of the earth' in the 'old times'

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Despite Dickens' distaste for prohibition, he wanted to support Colden, whom he had befriended in 1840. Colden, whose father was mayor of New York, hoped that Dickens' fame would make his society part of New York's establishment.

The St David's Society was founded in 1801 to assist needy immigrants from Wales to America and by 1842 had embraced the temperance movement.

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LITVACK SAID THAT DICKENS HAD A WARM ATTITUDE TOWARDS WALES, holidaying there in the 1830s, although he found the language baffling. The author wrote in a letter to a friend that he should visit the fictional village of Cwymllrwyndeniswymlllestevodd ap Mweddyslwynr.

The newly discovered letter, printed in The Teetotaller and General Newspaper of New South Wales on March 29, 1843, also suggested that Dickens craved the company of fellow Britons while on tour in the US.

Dickens was one of the first international celebrities and grew tired of people constantly looking at him and wanting to shake his hand. Litvack said that Dickens may have been attracted by the charitable aims of the society and “a little of the feeling of home”.

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 Charles was no Bob Cratchit, or, come to think of it, Ebenezer
 Scrooge
 He'd have your likes of Ernest Hemingway for breakfast
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