



The Illustrated Letters of
Richard Doyle
to His Father, 1842–1843

Edited with an Introduction and Afterword by
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Preface

This is the first annotated scholarly edition of fifty-three illustrated letters that Richard “Dicky” Doyle sent to his father, John Doyle, between July 1842 and December 1843. A handful of visual extracts from the letters have appeared before, the most recent thirty years ago, but nothing like a comprehensive edition of the series has ever been published and is long overdue. Richard Doyle produced the letters as part of a weekly assignment beginning when he was seventeen years old. For a number of personal and professional reasons, as I explore more fully in the introduction, John Doyle charged Richard and his brothers with the task of describing their daily activities in a weekly epistle. He encouraged them to attend important cultural and civic events in London, to reflect on what they had learned from their formal schooling, and to enhance their verbal accounts with sketches and drawings. For their labors he paid them in coin, though he fined them if they missed or were late with an assignment.

The Doyles were one of the most artistically talented British families of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Richard Doyle (1824–1883) was a Victorian artist and illustrator best known for designing the iconic cover of *Punch*, the leading satirical magazine of the day. His father, John Doyle, was an important political cartoonist who engaged the British public for years as the anonymous “HB.” Richard’s older brother, James, was an oil painter, illustrator, and historian; his younger brother Henry was a portrait painter and museum director for the National Gallery of Ireland; and most notably, their nephew (son of their youngest brother, Charles) was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

Richard Doyle was precocious—at the age of twelve he illustrated a series of episodes from Homer and at fifteen published his first book. He composed the illustrated letters to his father between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, and this fact, combined with their fine drawing and high degree of finish, makes them remarkable. But they are not merely the beautiful evidence of a prodigy. In a series of brilliant and vivid manuscript canvases, Doyle offers a young man’s observations of Victorian customs and society. He visits operas, plays, parades, picture exhibitions, military reviews, and zoos. He watches the queen as she visits the House of Commons and he witnesses the state funeral of the Duke of Sussex. He is caught up in the Chartist riots of August 1842 and is robbed during one of the melees. He attends the rallies in support of Father

Theobald Mathew, the Irish “Apostle of Temperance.” And he provides numerous illustrations of ordinary people strolling the streets, massing at railway stations, and swarming the parks and picture galleries of the metropolis. At the very least, the myriad pen-and-ink sketches offer a fresh perspective on major social and cultural events of London during the early 1840s.

Doyle’s journal letters reveal themselves as much more than simple snapshots of urban life, however. Many explore anxieties about his family and the tragic early deaths of two of his siblings. They contain absorbing and symbolic visual images that lend depth to the comic gait and easy glide of his prose. While the letters that appear early in the sequence are generally light in tone and revel in caricature and social satire, the later manuscripts offer a more somber picture of his emotional state. These letters include dream-like and experimental drawings that combine representational modes and imagine complex visions of apocalypse and mass doom. Doyle creates hybrid compositions that blend his urban experience, visual memory of contemporary pictures, and fascination with fairy tale, legend, and mythology. Reading the letters as a complete series for the first time affords us the opportunity to see the evolution of Doyle’s visual thinking and his increasing maturity as an artist over the brief course of sixteen months.

PROVENANCE

It was only very recently that Richard Doyle’s letters to his father became accessible to the public as individual manuscripts that could be exhibited and conveniently studied. After John Doyle’s death in 1868, the group of at least seventy-nine letters to him by his sons Richard, Henry, and Charles descended to Richard Doyle.¹ After Richard’s death in 1883, his elder brother James oversaw the estate and presumably gave the letters to his nephew, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, with whom Richard had always been on good terms. Conan Doyle’s son, Adrian Conan Doyle (d. 1970), eventually inherited the collection, and in 1974 the letters were purchased by the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, where they are currently held.² In 2005 the letters were disbound from their album for the purpose of conservation and display. At some point before Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gathered them together, two of Richard’s letters, dated October 16, 1842, and October 15, 1843, must have been separated from the original sequence. Around 1925 they were acquired by Henry Folger from Maggs of London, and they now form part of the Folger Library’s collection in Washington, D.C. In the present edition, these two letters have been happily reunited with their fellows.

Since his father may have granted him a week’s reprieve now and then, it is not entirely clear how many of Richard’s letters are missing. Given periodic two-week gaps in the chronology, however, I suspect there are at least a dozen letters that are now lost or have found their way into private collections. Between the first letter of July 3, 1842, and the last of December 17, 1843—a more or less consistent march of sixteen and a half months—the reader encounters three other significant gaps. The first, from October

22 to December 25, 1842, covers a typically hectic time for the Doyle family. We may assume that Richard was busy with preparations for the family's annual Christmas show and also with other family collaborations such as the illustrations to *Jack the Giant Killer* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

The second month-long gap, between May [27] and June 25, 1843, is easier to account for because it coincides with a family tragedy that I examine closely in the introduction. The third hiatus, between November 19 and December 17, 1843, is satisfactorily explained by Richard's demanding new job as an illustrator for *Punch* magazine. During these feverish weeks he was spending more time away from home, meeting the staff and executing designs on strict deadline, learning the skill of wood engraving, and working on his own "Cartoons," his entries for one of the later competitions to decorate the rebuilt Westminster Hall with frescoes. On the first page of his letter of December 17, 1843, the colorful figure of Punch bursts through the letter plane, serving as urgent testimony to the demands of his new job and the rapid "Punchification" of his life. Similar evidence of strain is revealed in his pleading for an extension on the annual Christmas performance. Doubtless in fulfilling his new commitments and responding to the busy social life that accompanied his position, Richard felt that his father would forgive him for skipping a few of the Sunday numbers. After all, at age nineteen he had now become a professional artist. Taken as a whole, then, these weekly journal-letters, along with his other teenage projects and publications, constitute the brilliant apprenticeship of his brief but dazzling career at *Punch*.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Richard Doyle's letters to his father have been published before only in small selections and never *en suite*. Extracts from several of the more visually arresting manuscripts have often been reproduced but usually to the detriment of their integrity as designs within a specific context and larger sequence. Scholars or journalists have reprinted single pages from letters or have plucked individual vignettes or decorations from their calligraphic context and printed them separately. These images have been deployed mainly as fragmentary "quotes," and as such the visual material tends to lose both the richness of its specific context within a given letter and its larger place within the evolution of Doyle's thinking as an artist, illustrator, and social commentator. To be fair, the letters were in the possession of Adrian Conan Doyle until the early 1970s and therefore difficult of access. No doubt these material conditions restricted efforts to publish more than a handful of reproductions. Practical considerations of space and cost—the expensive proposition of reproducing all fifty-three manuscripts as high-quality facsimiles—have also militated against the publication of all the letters. This contingency along with a lingering perception of Doyle as a lightweight—a charming, talented, and witty but finally amateur draughtsman—has kept these vibrant and psychologically complex letters from public view.

As far as I know, the first publication of excerpts from the letters, accompanied by a brief commentary, appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* for November 1944 and April 1945.³ Calling them “a fascinating sheaf of letters” from “a peculiarly Victorian genius,” Peter Quennell, editor of the magazine, included eleven reproductions that demonstrate the versatility of Doyle’s imagination and his whimsical visual style (“A Note on Richard Doyle,” 224). With World War II grinding on for yet another year and London in ruins, Quennell decided to emphasize the therapeutic charm of the illustrations and their lively recreation of the city: “the eye rambles delightedly across page after page of spirited improvisations, lyrical, grotesque, sentimental and fantastic, street-scenes and self portraits and caricatures and landscapes, in a long imaginative panorama of London of an hundred years ago” (224). Quennell saw the letters as a nostalgic balm for contemporary ills, “the arabesques and acrobatics described by Richard Doyle’s pen-nib” acting as perfect anodyne for war weariness (“Richard Doyle—II,” 275). Among the illustrations, he included the following: several of Doyle’s head- and tailpieces that show finely detailed street scenes and sketches of Victorians at play; the Temperance procession tumbling down the hill (no. 42); the gallimaufry of grotesques in Doyle’s sketchbook letter (no. 52; see plates 7–9 in the gallery); and the two largest and most compelling self-portraits, depicting Doyle in a parody of the typical Royal Academy portrait of that year (no. 35) and, in the final letter, slumped in his chair surrounded by a tiny team of fanciful workers (no. 53). On the whole, Quennell domesticated his subject, arguing that like other Victorian artists, Doyle was aware of the darker vision of Bosch or Goya, but that for him their “nightmare has been broken and saddled and is trotted up as a quiet saddle-horse for innocent family-outings” (275).

In the first complete biography of Doyle published just three years later, Daria Hambourg followed Quennell in excerpting images from the letters, using Doyle’s caricatured self-portrait at a concert as her title page (no. 31), and grouping a series of nine illustrations at the back of the text.⁴ Her selections differ from Quennell’s, and several fill the page, but they are enlarged or reduced in scale, printed out of chronological order, and wind up looking like distorted snapshots of Doyle’s work. It was not until thirty-five years later that Rodney Engen published the first full-length scholarly biography of Doyle. Written to coincide with the centenary exhibition of his work at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1983, Engen’s biography provides extensive discussions of Doyle’s patrons and friends, his relationships with authors like Thackeray and Dickens, his later career as a painter of fairy scenes, and his ill-fated love for Blanche Stanley.⁵ The study also includes valuable appendices that catalog the Doyle family’s book and periodical illustrations as well as their exhibited paintings and watercolors, unpublished work, and posthumous publications. Disappointingly, however, Engen’s book prints only six illustrations from Doyle’s letters to his father, all of which are reduced in size, blurred, and dark. Much of Doyle’s fine attention to detail and mastery of pen-and-ink drawing are obscured by the poor quality of the reproductions.⁶

DATING THE LETTERS

Accurate dating and sequencing of the letters were initially hampered by three factors: Richard Doyle's own casual regard for specific days and years; the later addition by another hand of consecutive numbers for all fifty-one letters at the Morgan Library; and the tentative penciled-in dates supplied by this or another editor for a handful of individual letters.⁷ Trusting Doyle's own dates and making educated guesses about the three letters that he left undated, a family member or later curator supplied a number at the top left-hand corner of the first page of each manuscript letter. Although well-intentioned, this editorial intervention produced chronological inconsistencies with significant implications for our understanding of Doyle's development as a young adult and gifted letter writer as well as an aspiring graphic artist and social commentator. I have been able to rearrange the letters into a reliable chronological order based on contemporary references in the letters and their correlation with evidence in the *London Times*, new information about the deaths of Doyle's siblings, and internal evidence of two different salutations and two major changes of residence. Some uncertainty remains over more precise dating in several of the letters—that is, over the exact calendar days within specific months of the years 1842 and 1843—but since Doyle noted the correct month on these letters the concern seems less urgent.

Doyle dated, though he probably did not write, the majority of his letters on Sunday morning. As he warns his father in an early letter, he “cannot be expected to have it done as soon as if [he] wrote two pages of Saturday night, which is usually the case.”⁸ Thus, particularly in 1842, he often began a letter on Saturday evening, “when the other gentry [his brothers] were writing their letters,”⁹ and finished it on Sunday morning or later that day. This practice led to his occasional confusion of Saturday for Sunday dates, though he clearly inscribes four of the letters “Saturday evening” or “Saturday night,” and five “Sunday Evening.” As his letters became increasingly more elaborate and visually sophisticated, he began them earlier, most likely in the middle of the week, working on them when he could find spare time from his other artistic projects. As he tells his father in August 1843, “Whenever I can have my letter done by Sunday morning, I will, that is, when I find time to begin it some evening in the week.” Evidence of this habit occurs in three instances where he headed a letter “Sunday” and then followed it with a calendar date that fell on the previous Wednesday or Thursday.¹⁰ Further evidence of Doyle getting a jump on his weekly assignment can be detected in the carefully ruled paper, neat penmanship, and progressively more intricate border designs and images that come to characterize the later letters.¹¹ By early 1843 he was spending much more time on these manuscripts, returning again and again to polish and refine them.

Several patterns of internal evidence help us establish reliable dates for individual letters and hence a coherent sequence for the collection as a whole. The first is Doyle's salutation, which begins as “My Dear Papa” and then abruptly shifts to “My Dear Father” after the thirteenth letter.¹² Does his eighteenth birthday in September 1842

signal to him the onset of adulthood and imply greater independence? Does something happen during this time to formalize his relationship with his father, thrust him off the paternal knee? Has someone else in the family or a family friend begun to read the letters, prompting him to drop the potentially embarrassing “Papa”? There is simply not enough evidence to offer a plausible conjecture. If Doyle is frustratingly erratic in the dating of his letters, he is a master of consistency in the greeting. After the letter of October 16, 1842, he never again refers to his father as “Papa.” Combined with other internal evidence, this change helps us accurately resituate letters that are out of sequence in the former numbering system.

The changes of address on the final sheet of each letter provide us with additional information to establish a reliable order. The manuscripts reveal that John Doyle lived at three different addresses during the period from July 1842 to December 1843. His primary residence, where most members of the Doyle family continued to live well into middle age, was 17 Cambridge Terrace, Hyde Park, London. Of the fifty-three letters, Richard Doyle addressed forty-one to this location.¹³ As a result of civil unrest in London, however, the family decided temporarily to leave their dwelling in Cambridge Terrace. On Monday, August 22, 1842, in response to the increasingly dangerous climate surrounding the Chartist assemblies, the Doyle family removed to 2 Dartmouth Terrace, Blackheath, near Greenwich Hospital. They remained there for nearly two months until October 16, 1842, when they returned to London.¹⁴ Richard composed and addressed a cluster of seven letters at Blackheath (all to “My Dear Papa”), helping us identify one of the three undated letters in the collection, that of [September 11, 1842].

The second change of address most likely came as a result of the family tragedy mentioned earlier. In late April 1843 John Doyle set up brief residence, as Richard writes, “in a cottage at Acton,” about five miles west of their Hyde Park neighborhood and in those days still a rural outpost. He remained there for about six weeks. Richard addressed five letters to Acton, from April [23] to May [27], 1843, the only correspondence sent to his father when John Doyle was living at a different location. The events described in these letters show that Richard and his siblings remained at Cambridge Terrace. The next existing letter in the sequence is addressed to his father at 17 Cambridge Terrace and is dated June 25, 1843.

In two of the letters Doyle makes a vital error in writing down the year, mistaking 1842 for 1843 and thereby sending an earlier editor down the wrong chronological path. A host of internal evidence demonstrates that the letter Doyle dates “Sunday Morning April 1842” should properly be moved up a year, to Sunday, April [23], [1843]. The implications for this correction are enormous, since it means that the letter that originally stood at the very opening of the sequence in the old numbering system leapfrogs twenty-nine other letters in place. What presented a significant interpretive problem—the gap of two to three months between the first and second letters at the very beginning of the series—thus vanishes and the span of the project occupies a more

temporally coherent period. The correction solves another problem that bedeviled me for several months, namely why Doyle would begin his project with such imaginative visual flair only to compose the next seven consecutive letters in a manner so visually parsimonious and verbally dense. Inaugurating the entire series with its intricate lattice-work of miniature figures and finished vignettes, the letter formerly dated “April 1842” at first seemed like a stylistic anachronism that required its own trellis of explanation. Resituated in late April 1843 it now assumes a more logical position alongside the lively imaginative experiments with frames and border designs that exemplify Doyle’s other letters of this period, and marks a crucial stage in the ongoing development of the young artist’s visual sensibility.

The other major correction resolves the logical contradiction of two letters bearing the same date, August 6, 1842. Both are inscribed “Sunday,” though August 6 actually fell on a Sunday only in 1843. Since Doyle often confused Saturday and Sunday in his letters the perpetual calendar will not help us in this instance. What *does* help is that the August 6 letter beginning with Doyle’s mention of his second visit to the cartoons could only have been written in August 1843. It was at this time that the Fine Arts Commission displayed the “cartoon” submissions of those artists who had entered the first competition to decorate the new Westminster Hall with frescoes depicting scenes from English history, literature, and mythology. We know that Doyle was one of the first spectators to view the designs and that he returned eagerly several times to study and sketch them. His imagination and ambition were so fired, in fact, that he and his brothers worked on their own cartoons for possible submission to a future competition.¹⁵

I have provided a rationale for these two amended dates in footnotes, as I have done for the three letters where Doyle omitted the date altogether, and others where he simply jotted down the month and year. Although several of these dates must remain speculative lacking conclusive proof, they are nonetheless based on convincing internal and contextual evidence. The only letter that I have found impossible to pin down to a specific day of the month is that of July 1843, though the context of taking the water cure at Kensington Gardens places it in the same period as a similar letter of August 27, 1843. We can confidently date other letters in which Richard neglected to supply calendar days—most from the period July through September 1843—by following reports on the contemporary scene in the *London Times*. Major public events such as the annual Royal Academy Exhibition, the unveiling of the Westminster Hall Cartoons, the several appearances of Father Mathew in London, and the various concerts and military reviews were all announced and reported in the *Times*, which helps us establish the precise days on which the letters were dated, if not written.

EDITORIAL PROCEDURES

Compared to many of his contemporaries, Richard Doyle wrote in a lucid and legible hand. His penmanship is always neat, even fastidious, the manuscripts showing

evidence of meticulous cancelations, rewritings, and crossings-out of individual letters. Moreover, he often ruled the paper with lines that he then erased. This practice adds to the overall appearance of neatness and precision as the clear cursive tilts elegantly across the page. In this regard, his fine calligraphy matches the attention to detail that characterizes his drawings and border decorations, his expert and controlled draughtsmanship. The verbal dimension was as scrupulously composed as the visual, the sprinkling of carets demonstrating that Doyle carefully proofread his work. It is only the rare instance when one encounters a word that is canceled, erased, or indecipherable. Most of the time the pen is steady and the meaning clear. One senses that the text of many of the letters was copied out fair from an earlier draft.

Because Doyle writes with such clarity, and in the interests of enhancing this readability, I have only lightly edited the manuscripts in my transcriptions. Doyle occasionally tripped himself up with punctuation (or lack thereof), and since this might cause some momentary confusion on the part of the modern reader, I have silently inserted commas, hyphens, full stops, quotation and question marks, and apostrophes for contractions and possessives. I have also added capitalization where appropriate (usually at the beginning of a sentence), created paragraph breaks to relieve the eye, used angled brackets to indicate possibly meaningful scorings-out, and in square brackets provided the occasional missing letter or two for coherency. In addition, I have silently corrected the more obvious slips of the pen such as repeated words (“the the”; “to to”) and regularized Doyle’s various fonts, flourishes, and ornamental initials, as well as his oversized script, recognizing that the reader has facsimiles of the manuscripts to hand. For practical and economic reasons, the full-sheet address pages have been omitted from the facsimiles, though I have supplied the information contained in them at the head of my transcriptions. Happily, only two of the fifty-three letters feature address pages with illustrations (nos. 10 and 31), and these I have described in the head-notes.

I have been lenient when it comes to Doyle’s orthography. I have retained the majority of his idiosyncratic misspellings because I believe they reveal vestiges of his lingering youth and innocence that make us more attentive to the borderline between childhood and adulthood (as in the change in salutation from “Papa” to “Father”). These errors also embody the lively and expressive character of the letters themselves and pull gently against the surface precision of his pen and Victorian propriety. So much in the letters is aimed at fulfilling the obligation of the weekly assignment, at pleasing his father, showing him how observant, how mature, how diligent and hard-working he is. By contrast, the misspellings reveal the rampant, excited boy, the “Dicky Doyle” who cannot resist running ahead of the ruled line, chucking the dictionary and exuberantly throwing himself into the life of the anecdotes he relates. These errors nudge the letters from scribal compositions to oral tales. And this is why so many of the mistakes involve phonetic spellings, reflecting how Doyle would have pronounced the words aloud. Hence, for example, he writes “discribe” (no. 2), “disign” (no. 3), “caracature”

(no. 11), “purpertrated” (no. 13), “persued” (no. 27), “symtoms” (no. 28), “oppertunities” (no. 29), “pleasunt” (no. 36) and “dispondent” (no. 37). He shares every schoolboy’s weakness of neglecting the golden rule, “*i before e except after c,*” by writing “concieve” and “recieve,” and then perversely inverts the rule with howlers like “hieght,” “sieze,” and “peir.” He tends to double up on consonants (“Millitary,” “assylum,” “dissappeared,” “duett,” “wittnessing,” “untill,” “litterary”); confuse “affect” and “effect” (no. 2); and occasionally succumb to mild dyslexia (“villiany,” “gaurd,” “Christain”). On occasion he spells a word correctly—“ceiling”—only to misspell it in the very next line, “ciel-ing” (no. 31). Most delightful (and revealing) are the magnificent mash-up in “manoe-verer” (no. 20), the hint of insanity in the footman of “brief demensions” (no. 39), the dig at the parish authorities who incorrectly “assertain” the time of Father Mathew’s temperance rally (no. 42), and the Keatsian *contretemps*, “rediculous” (no. 4; no. 18, etc.). None of these missteps hinders the readability of the letters, and all are meaningful enough in psychological terms to be well worth preserving.

NOTES

1. I have tracked down three letters of this time from the eldest son, James, to his father, two at the Toronto Public Library (November 12, 1843, and undated) and one at the Folger Library (July 30, 1842).

2. The Morgan purchased the collection from the New York dealer Lew David Feldman, whose firm, House of El Dieff, specialized in mystery and “Sherlockiana.” The letters were submitted to the Morgan “for examination and approval,” indicating that the collection was offered to the Morgan directly and had not appeared before in an auction or sale catalog.

3. Peter Quennell, “A Note on Richard Doyle,” *Cornhill Magazine* 161 (November 1944), 224, and “Richard Doyle—II: A Note by the Editor,” *Cornhill Magazine* 161 (April 1945), 275. From April 1861 to October 1862, Doyle had published his series, *Bird’s Eye Views of Society*, in the *Cornhill Magazine*, then under the editorship of William Thackeray.

4. Daria Hambourg, *Richard Doyle: His Life and Work*, English Masters of Black-and-White, gen. ed. Graham Reynolds (London: Art and Technics, 1948).

5. Rodney Engen, *Richard Doyle* (Stroud, Glos: Catalpa Press, 1983). He also edited and contributed to the exhibition catalog *Richard Doyle and His Family* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983). None of the letters was featured in this exhibition because at this time they were still bound in the album and hence could not have been properly displayed.

6. For a recent article treating the letters, see Kathryn Shattuck, “Dear Dad, Went to an Exhibition. Wish You Were Here,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2006, 33. Shattuck annotates the final page of Doyle’s letter of July [2], 1843, describing his visit to the Westminster Hall Cartoons. See also Carolyn Vega, “‘Punchification’ Keeps Richard Doyle from His ‘Christmas Things,’” *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2011, which reproduces most of the letter of December 17, 1843. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-vega/richard-doyle-christmas-letter_b_1163719.html.

7. A curator penciled in call numbers for the two letters at the Folger Library, which are also labeled, “1” and “2.”

8. August [14], 1842.

9. July 3, 1842.

10. See letter nos. 11, 35, and 42.

11. Only one letter is formally dated Wednesday (no. 10, September 27, 1842), though it actually falls on a Tuesday in 1842. Might this have been his birthday?

12. Three letters after this time begin simply, “Dear Father.”

13. A handful of letters do not carry the Hyde Park address but imply it. They are directed to “J. Doyle Esq^{re}” or “J. Doyle Esq^{re} / & & &.” Richard abbreviated this address when he was rushed, especially toward the end of 1843. For more on the issue of addressing and “mailing” the letters, see the introduction.

14. Given his career as a political caricaturist and the necessity of his propinquity to the seat of government, it is likely that John Doyle returned to Cambridge Terrace earlier than his children, and that he commuted back and forth several times during their stay in Blackheath.

15. See Doyle’s sketch of the brothers working on their collective cartoon in the letter of August [13], 1843 (no. 41).