

Proud as Punch

Correspondence from a young Victorian cartoonist to his demanding father

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 Grant E. Scott, editor

THE ILLUSTRATED LETTERS OF
 RICHARD DOYLE TO HIS FATHER,
 1842–1843
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This beautifully presented book contains for the first time the complete series of fifty-three illustrated letters written to his father by Richard Doyle, the “precocious boy” who would become famous for his *Punch* drawings. Many things about these letters, written when Doyle was aged seventeen to nineteen, are unusual. They were exquisitely executed once a week, with a few exceptions, for John Doyle, a successful political caricaturist, who set them as an exercise, an apprenticeship for an artistic career for his son. Richard – Dick, as he signed himself – shared the weekly task with his brothers James, Henry, Frank and Charles. Each had to write and illustrate two pages of news, in pencil, pen and sometimes watercolour. Only a few of his brothers’ letters survive, while Dick’s remain intact, all but two in the Morgan Library in New York (the other two being in the Folger Library in Washington).

The family’s situation was a strange one. The mother died in 1839, when Richard, the third of seven children and second son, was fifteen; John Doyle kept them all at home in his large house near Hyde Park, educating them himself. They not only drew but played musical instruments and put on regular Christmas entertainments at home. When John Doyle instructed the boys to write their letters, they did so working together in the same upstairs room in the house, then either handed their letters to him by the deadline of 7 am on Sundays, or – for some reason which remains opaque – went out to post them to their home

address, or got a courier to deliver them.

Doyle and his family are enigmas. Grant E. Scott in his meticulous and detailed introduction and notes makes the most of the scant information available. Only recently has it been discovered that Mrs Doyle (née Marianne Conan) died in 1839, not in 1832, as was previously believed, and Scott himself has discovered the year and month in which the fourth son, Frank, died aged fourteen or fifteen. His death in June 1843 is not mentioned in Richard’s letters, but there is a gap between May 17 and June 25 which is probably explained by the loss of Frank. If it is hard to understand why the teenage Richard does not allude to his younger brother’s illness and death, it is also strange that nowhere in these letters, either before or after Frank’s death, does Richard write about faith, doubt, friendships, or any kind of personal relationship. The family was Roman Catholic and devout, but no clue about this appears. We get no sense of the personalities of the brothers and two sisters of the household, though they spent all their days together and Richard often writes about their activities. Even when he describes going to events such as opera, concerts and art exhibitions with one or other of his brothers, he divulges nothing about them. They appear occasionally in the sketches, but only as generic human beings, not as individuals.

In the one amusing sketch in which all four surviving brothers appear together, adorning the letter of August 13, 1843, only Dick himself is rendered as a “character”: his most recognizable feature, seen in every picture he drew, is his disproportionately large head with its huge shock of hair overhanging his face like the projecting upper storey of a Tudor house. The brothers were working on a huge cartoon (in the sense of large preliminary drawing) which they intended to submit to the competition then going on to decorate the

newly built Houses of Parliament. Cartoons were invited on historical or literary subjects, and Doyle's letters describe his visits to Westminster Hall to look at the submitted drawings, most of which he derides. Although he and his brothers were serious about their own efforts, he extended his amused scepticism about the whole exercise to the Doyle family, telling his father that "we ought to have a cartoon

between us for the next competition". The accompanying sketch accordingly shows a huge canvas being filled by the four brothers, one of them somehow having got up to the top of the canvas at the back and now drawing upside down by leaning over it, one on the floor doing the bottom part with his back to us, the third standing on a block (on tiptoes) painting halfway up the right-hand side. Dick Doyle himself – the only one whose face is partially visible – sits hunched like a little elf on an impossibly high stool, which he could not under any circumstances have climbed up, painting with a long brush, but apparently making no mark with it except for a shadow of the stool itself and his figure on top of it. (The editor points out that Doyle put Mr Punch up a similar ladder in "Punch's Own Picture" in 1847.) The sketch is full of visual jokes and teases; at least two of the brothers are in physically unbelievable positions.

Doyle begins the letters in July 1842 with the emphasis on producing beautiful calligraphy; a few tiny figures are dropped in to illustrate the text. Soon the illustrations begin to take up more space than the writing, a fact of which Dick is sometimes proud and sometimes ashamed. A frequent mild complaint is that he has not found a suitable subject in his week's outings to London's public places; he finds that though it is hard to fill the space with words, he can do so with pictures. When there is not enough human life to represent, he resorts to depicting the creatures with which he is nowadays most associated as an artist, "small devils" – goblins, fairies, half-human and half-animal figures – which he "desperately" draws from imagination, "in the hope", as he admits with humorous despair in Sep-

tember 1842, "of diminishing the space for writing". These minuscule beings, seen climbing, tumbling, grasping, chasing and being chased across the page, or round it, became the carnivalesque figures he created for the famous cover of *Punch*, which he joined in the weeks when the last of these letters were being written.

His joining the illustrative staff of the magazine in late 1843 put a natural end to these letters, which can be seen, as Scott remarks, as a fine apprenticeship for the work he would do

for *Punch* for the next seven years. (He left the magazine in November 1850 in protest against its attacks on the Catholic Church in the wake of the Pope's establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in England that year.) The *Punch* cover designed by the nineteen-year-old Doyle lasted for over a century, with its pleasingly anarchic encirclement of fantastic little figures, some clothed, others naughtily naked, all busily engaged in doing something, though it is often hard to tell what. The 1842–3 letters are full of such figures. Although always treated both pictorially and verbally with light humour by Doyle, they sometimes combine comedy with threat. A disturbing sketch on April 16, 1843 shows an ogre's head emanating from a hillside, the huge mouth devouring a crowd of respectably dressed people, all of whom, as Scott points out, are apparently eagerly running *into* the cavernous maw. On October 15, 1843 Doyle paints a verbal and visual picture of himself enduring a waking dream in which a multitude of hobgoblins fly and caper across the page, "carrying all my 'cartoon' designs", which they fling on to the floor, while behind him lurk the ghosts of his historical subjects, William the Conqueror and his son Henry I. Doyle signs off mockingly, or semi-mockingly, "in the greatest terror and consternation", "your most affectionate son Dick".

While Doyle always treats himself as a comic turn, he was timid and suffered from ill health; in 1850 he fell unrequitedly in love, and never married. When he joined *Punch* at nineteen his father wrote to the publishers asking

that his son be excused “for the present” from attending the famous weekly dinners at which contributors including Thackeray and John Leech met to discuss the magazine but also to eat, drink and tell questionable jokes. Doyle senior explained that his son’s health was “not strong”. From the letters printed here we know that after Frank’s death John Doyle sent his children to “drink the waters in Kensington Gardens”. He was clearly an anxious father. More than that we do not know. Dick sometimes worries in his letters that he is not living up to his father’s expectations with regard to the weekly letter, but there are no hints about John Doyle’s response. Scott draws tentative conclusions about the family’s reactions to the death of Frank, seeing in a couple of the sketches expressions of Dick’s grief during Frank’s illness in May 1843. I am not fully convinced. The often reproduced self-sketch of May 17 shows Doyle for once full-length and facing us. His head is as big as his body, the hair luxuriant as always, the eyes staring, eyebrows arched, and the mouth pouting. Scott reads this as a “direct image of his grief”, “wide-eyed and stricken”. “Wide-eyed” certainly, but grief and comedy make uncomfortable companions, and if grief is being expressed here, it is surely not in a direct manner. Doyle and his family remain as much of an enigma to me after reading these letters as they were before, though their reproduction here in all their elusive detail, scrupulously annotated by the editor, is both pleasurable and educative.



A letter from Richard Doyle to his father, dated December 17, 1843