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# CHARLES DICKENS

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## MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT



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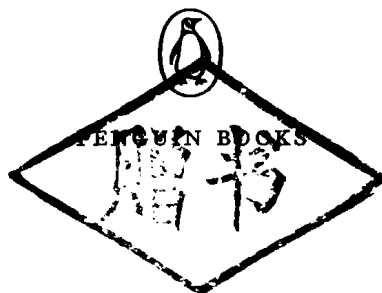
CHARLES DICKENS



CHARLES DICKENS

The Life and Adventures of  
MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

*Edited with an introduction by P. N. Furbank  
and original illustrations by  
Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz')*



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## CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812. He was the second of the eight children of John Dickens, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, whose own parents had been in service to Lord Crewe. Although John Dickens was hard-working, he was rarely able to live within his income, and this brought a series of crises upon his family, which lived under the shadow of menacing social insecurity.

John Dickens's work took him from place to place, so that Charles spent his early childhood in Portsmouth, London and Chatham. He was happiest at Chatham, where he attended a school run by a young Oxford graduate, who recognized his abilities and paid him special attention. In 1823 the family moved to London faced with financial disaster, and, to help out, a friend of John Dickens offered Charles work in a blacking business which he managed. Two days before his twelfth birthday the boy began work at a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs, labelling bottles for six shillings a week.

Within a fortnight John Dickens was arrested for debt, and soon the whole family joined him in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The double blow – his menial job and the family shame – gave Charles a shock which transformed him. In later years he told only his closest friend, John Forster, of these experiences, which haunted him till his death.

After three months in prison, John Dickens was released on receipt of a legacy from his mother, but it was not until weeks later that he withdrew Charles from work and sent him to school, where he did well. At fifteen, Charles began work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys. Sensing a vocation elsewhere, he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later began to work as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons.

In 1829 he fell passionately in love with Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker. Their affair staggered fruitlessly on until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, he began to report parliamentary debates, and won himself a high reputation for speed and accuracy. His first *Sketches by Boz* appeared in magazines before he was



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twenty-one. In 1833 he joined the reporting staff of the *Morning Chronicle*. A well-received volume of his *Sketches* appeared on his twenty-fourth birthday.

His growing reputation secured him a commission from the publishers, Chapman and Hall, to provide the text to appear in monthly instalments beside sporting plates by a popular artist, Seymour. He 'thought of Pickwick'. Three days after the first number appeared he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a fellow-journalist, on the prospect. Although early sales were unexceptional, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) soon became a publishing phenomenon, and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret was the method of cheap serial publication, which Dickens used for all his subsequent novels, and which was copied by other writers.

While *Pickwick* was still running, Dickens began *Oliver Twist* (1838). *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) provided him with a third success, and sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) reached 100,000. After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens set off with his wife for the United States. He went full of enthusiasm for the young republic, but returned heartily disillusioned, in spite of a triumphant reception. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1843).

His first setback came when *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) did not repeat the extraordinary success of its predecessors, though he promptly inaugurated his triumphant series of *Christmas Books* with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). He now travelled abroad, first to Italy (1844-5) and then to Switzerland and Paris (1846). During a brief interlude in England he projected, not another novel but a paper, the *Daily News*. This first appeared in 1846, but Dickens resigned after only seventeen days as editor.

His next novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), was more wholly serious and more carefully planned than his early work. In *David Copperfield* (1849-50) he explored his own childhood and youth, thinly disguised. In the 1850s he increased his already intense interest in public affairs. He founded *Household Words*, a weekly magazine which combined entertainment with social purpose; it was succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*, which sold as many as 300,000 copies. *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *Hard Times* (1854) have strong social themes, and *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) continues

Dickens's bitter public campaign against the whole framework of government and administration which had mismanaged the Crimean War.

In 1858 he separated from his wife. Although Kate, a shadowy, slow person, had given him ten children, she had never suited his exuberant temperament very well. He courted a young actress, Ellen Ternan, who became his secret mistress. He was now living mainly in Kent, at Gad's Hill, near his boyhood home of Chatham. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) completed his life's main work of thirteen major novels. By the mid-1860s his health was failing, partly under the strain of his successful but exhausting public readings from his own work, which had begun in 1858. An immensely profitable but physically shattering series of readings in America (1867-8) speeded his decline, and he collapsed during a 'farewell' series in England. His last novel, *Edwin Drood* (1870), was never completed; he suffered a stroke, and died at Gad's Hill after a full day's work on 9 June 1870. Lamentation was demonstrative and universal, and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Dickens's extreme energy was not exhausted by his unique success as a novelist. His weekly journalism made heavy demands on his time after 1850, and he constantly turned to the stage; first, in many amateur theatricals, given privately or for charity, where he produced and took leading roles with great brilliance; later, in his public readings. His concern with social reform in his novels and journalism was matched by a personal interest in several charitable projects.

Furthermore, as Lionel Trilling puts it, 'the mere record of his conviviality is exhausting'. His typical relaxation was a long walk at great speed, and he was dedicated to any and every sort of game or jollification. In the early days of his success, observers were sometimes displeased by his flamboyant dress and a hint of vulgarity in his manners, but he had powerful, magnetizing eyes and overwhelming charm. Beneath his high spirits, friends could detect a permanent emotional insecurity and restlessness, which flavours the tragi-comic world of his novels.

Two biographies stand out among many: John Forster's *Life* (1872, many times reprinted); and Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph* (Gollancz, 1953), which

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embodies material neglected or suppressed by Forster. Readers interested in Dickens's methods as a novelist will be enlightened by John Butt's and Kathleen Tillotson's *Dickens at Work* (Methuen, 1957). There are innumerable specialized studies of his work, life, and views.

A.C.

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SOME fourteen months had passed since the last number of *Barnaby Rudge* when, in November 1842, Dickens finally set himself to write a new novel. It had been a deliberate plan on the part of himself and his publisher that he should give his public a rest; and the main incident of the intervening period had been his visit to America – during which the great radical writer, having been welcomed by a whole country as no other private citizen has ever been welcomed, decided that the vaunted radical republic was a sordid swindle. He returned to England disillusioned, but in tearing high spirits none the less, and wrote his *American Notes* at great speed – it was a cautious record of his journey, leaving out most of the severest criticisms contained in his letters from America – and in late autumn he went on a hilarious bachelor holiday, with John Forster and others, to Cornwall. ‘I never laughed in my life,’ he wrote, ‘as I did on this journey.’

He had toyed with the notion of setting the opening pages of his new novel ‘on the coast of Cornwall, in some terrible dreary iron-bound spot’; but when, on his return, he got down to the detailed plotting of the story, he abandoned the idea. He began the novel, however, on the same crest of high spirits: ‘perhaps no story was ever begun by him with stronger heart and confidence,’ says Forster.

His confidence received a blow when the opening numbers (the first having appeared in January 1843) sold only 20,000 copies – a dramatic decline from the sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which at one point reached 100,000 and even from those of *Barnaby Rudge*, which had declined from their original 70,000 but had never sunk below 30,000. The sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit* were never to rise above 23,000 (though in book-form it proved to be one of his greatest successes), and various reasons have been suggested for the falling-off – that he had lost ground with the public by his deliberate abstention from novel-writing, that the facetious opening chapter was disliked, or that his return to publication in monthly, as opposed to weekly, numbers was unpopular. Ada Nisbet\*,

\* ‘The Mystery of *Martin Chuzzlewit*’, in *Essays dedicated to Lily B. Campbell* (1950).

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however, has suggested more convincingly that the comparative failure of *Martin Chuzzlewit* had nothing to do with the novel itself (for, after all, its sales were bad from the beginning) but reflected a *previous* decline in Dickens's reputation, caused by disappointment with *Barnaby Rudge*, and the (on the whole) fairly cool reception of *American Notes*.

At all events the poor sales were a serious matter for Dickens and had two major consequences. They caused him (the plan of the novel still being fluid in many respects) to send the young Martin Chuzzlewit to America. (We only have Forster's word for it that this was how the American episode arose, but there seems no reason to doubt it.) And secondly, they led to his quarrelling with, and temporarily separating from, his publishers Chapman & Hall. There had been a clause in his agreement of September 1841 to the effect that, in the unlikely event of the profits of his new novel being insufficient to repay the advances made to him throughout 1842, his publishers might, after the fifth number, deduct £50 from the monthly £200 being paid to him. And when Dickens happened to be in Chapman & Hall's offices in June 1843, William Hall, thinking aloud, tactlessly murmured that they might have to invoke this clause. Dickens was bitterly affronted and at once angrily renounced £50 of his monthly allowance, making it necessary for him to borrow heavily from friends; and he broke with Chapman & Hall in the following year. The quarrel, which made him feel as if he had been 'rubbed in the tenderest part of my eyelids with bay-salt', put him off the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit* for a week or two, but he soon regained his poise, feeling more and more convinced that it was 'in a hundred points immeasurably the best of my stories'; and in October and November of 1843, on a sudden inspiration, he also wrote *A Christmas Carol* (a story with close thematic connexions with *Martin Chuzzlewit*).

\*

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* Dickens meant to produce a work with greater thematic organization than he had attempted before. His purpose, according to Forster (amplifying something that Dickens himself said), was 'to show, more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness'. The novel was to be a general and Jonsonian

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satire of the human condition. (The original epigraph was to have been 'Your homes the scene, yourselves the actors, here!', a line adapted from a verse prologue which Dickens had written for Westland Marton's play *The Patrician's Daughter*.) In particular it was to be a satire on the Family – on the poison of selfishness as transmitted within a family, and on false notions of family grandeur and the parasites which they breed.

The cover to the monthly parts reads: 'The / life and adventures / of / Martin Chuzzlewit / his relatives, friends, and enemies, / comprising / all his wills and his ways: / with an historical record of what he did, / and what he didn't: / showing, moreover, / who inherited the family plate, who came in for the silver spoons, / and who for the wooden ladles. / The whole forming a complete key to the / house of Chuzzlewit . . .' This cover title is pertinent; for the novel is the story of an inheritance. It relates the contrasting destinies of two descendants of the brothers Chuzzlewit, both born and bred to the same heritage of selfishness, showing how one – the young Martin – by good fortune escapes his evil inheritance and rejoins the larger human family, and how the other – Jonas Chuzzlewit – reaps its fatal harvest. Many readers have objected to the opening chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, with its knockabout burlesque of the snobbish conventions of a three-decker *Life and Times*. I think they are wrong, and agree with G. K. Chesterton that it is a brilliant piece of foolery; but at all events this mock-genealogy of the Chuzzlewit family is essential to Dickens's satirical scheme. It represents, as Steven Marcus has said, 'a kind of master-summary of the family of man', bringing home the point that a 'Family', in the snobbish sense of the term, differs from the family of Adam only as being an epitome of its vices and crimes.

The plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit* has a simple but satisfactory basic design, moving from the sunniest farcicality to the grimmest reaches of criminal psychology, and correspondingly from the domestic and parochial villainy of Pecksniff to the public villainy of the Anglo-Bengalee Assurance Company – Pecksniff on a public scale. In the event, however, the design is rather overshadowed by the towering bulk of two great grotesques, Pecksniff and Mrs Gamp, and distorted by the American episode, which was not fully assimilated into the structure.

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In writing the novel, Dickens meant to depend less upon improvisation than previously.

I have endeavoured in the progress of this Tale [he said in his first preface], to resist the temptation of the current Monthly Number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design. With this object in view, I have put a strong constraint upon myself from time to time, in many places; and I hope the story is the better for it, now.

This did not mean that he had worked out every detail from the outset. Several major elements in the novel – for instance the whole American excursion, and the character of Mrs Gamp – were conceived after the novel was well under way; and Dickens himself remarked on the surprising manner in which the characters opened out for him in the process of writing: ‘Given what one knows, what one does not know springs up; and I am as absolutely certain of its being true as I am of the law of gravitation – if such a thing be possible, more so.’ And despite Dickens’s intentions, the novel has the reputation of being one of his most badly organized. (Forster thought it was worse than *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* in this respect, and said that the difficulties which Dickens got himself into through deviations from his original scheme were a lesson to him for the rest of his career.)

Recently several admirers of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, like J. Hillis Miller, Steven Marcus and Jack Lindsay, have found ways of defending the novel’s construction – or rather, by tracing elaborate and coherent thematic patterns in the novel, they have diverted attention from its construction, leaving it to be inferred that we can admire and accept it. Their approach to *Martin Chuzzlewit* has been used by Barbara Hardy\* to attack the whole modern trend in Dickens criticism. She says, rather wittily, that Dickens’s ‘attempts to combine a moral action with his strong static social portraiture, his vague gestures towards *Bildungsroman* – all coming in part from his lack of intellectual quality and all particularly conspicuous in *Martin Chuzzlewit* – attracts the force of more methodical and original minds’ (meaning J. H. Miller and his fellow critics). And in a way her deflationary tone is welcome. For there’s no doubt that it’s very easy, when interpreting a long novel, to lose sight of one’s

\* In an article in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. Gross and G. Pearson (1962).

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original reading experience and to smooth out and rearrange the shape of the book according to one's wishes. And of course, nothing could be more irresponsible; for, ultimately, the only thing a critic ever has to cling on to is his moment-by-moment involvement in the author's narrative.

None the less, I don't think Barbara Hardy's attitude is the right one. It won't do to say about *Martin Chuzzlewit*, as she does, that 'this novel, unusually disintegrated though it is, gets by on its patches of compelling gusto, comic and also grim'. This is what people used to say about Dickens as a whole, though I suppose nobody would now. And 'gusto' is such a depressingly Philistine word to apply to the work of any major artist that I don't think one can decently use it. It suggests that there can be considerable art which has no power at all over our minds – 'pure' art, or 'pure' entertainment, which says nothing, or nothing worth listening to; whereas the whole achievement of modern criticism has been to show that what artists like Dickens and Shakespeare say, in the special way that art has of saying things, is the very thing that we value in them. And for an artist to say something is equivalent to his constructing something, since it is only by constructing that he can say anything. It is hard to conceive of a major writer who didn't possess the *power* of construction, even if he doesn't always exercise it.

So it is important at this stage to think what we mean by 'construction'. From one point of view, good construction in literature means the virtues of well-designed machinery – functional efficiency, economy of means, care that each working part should be doing the maximum possible amount of work. But this is, in a sense, a negative definition. And from another point of view, good construction is a matter of bringing very disparate and multifarious things and kinds of writing into a living relationship; and it is judged (we need another metaphor now) by the voltage of the spark emitted when they are brought into contact. From the first and more negative point of view, Trollope could be said to be a skilled constructor. But when asked to say what he particularly admires in Trollope's work, no one would be likely to mention his construction. For it is precisely at the crises and points of junction in Trollope's well-carpentered novels that you most feel his limitations; for it is here that you realize how little, by means of his



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plot, Trollope has managed to say, and you begin to murmur, with Henry James:

Our great objection to 'The Belton Estate' is that we seem to be reading a work written for children, a work prepared for minds unable to think, a work below the apprehension of the average man or woman. 'The Belton Estate' is a *stupid* book . . . essentially, organically stupid. It is without a single idea. It is utterly incompetent to the primary function of a book of whatever nature, to suggest thought.\*

And of this power of construction, which is so close to having something to say, Dickens shows himself a master in parts of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, though not in the whole of it. His handling of the Old Martin-Young Martin plot is certainly clumsy and deserves everything Barbara Hardy says against it. The grandfather and grandson are, as she says, not 'shown in the tension of personal relation - there is no human antagonism, or love, or fear, or any of the conflicting emotions which mark the relations of Oliver and Fagin, or Pip and Magwitch, or Florence and Dombey, where the moral antithesis is expressed in human relations, and changes accordingly'. The device by which Old Martin is made to pretend to fall into Pecksniff's clutches is thoroughly feeble, because it allows for no give-and-take between the two characters. It makes no difference whether we realize all the time that Old Martin is play-acting, or only retrospectively, since the contrast between his real and his assumed feelings is not put to any good dramatic use. It is a piece of bad construction, not because it is implausible, but because when it is in operation the novel becomes thin and repetitive.

On the other hand, if you consider with what marvellous art Young Bailey is used to draw together the threads of Todgers's, the Pecksniffs, Mrs Gamp and the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company, you see just how masterly Dickens's powers of construction can be. The whole Anglo-Bengalee part of the book, to which so many different trails lead, is magnificently constructed and looks forward to the handling of Chancery in *Bleak House*; and the method of construction can be sampled in little in the treatment of Young Bailey. You might be

\* Review in the *Nation* (4 January 1866); reprinted in *Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. M. Shapira (London: Heinemann, 1963; Penguin, 1968).