
FAVORITE
OSTEND.
CARRYING HIS MAJESTYS MAILS.
ADELPHI.
ROBERT MACAIRE
TOM&JERRY
THE CHRISTENING!!
!!!!!!
EVERY EVENING
CUSTAVUS THE THIRD!
MASK'D BALL.
16 WELSH GOATS.
10 COWS, 13 HOGS.
3 YOUNG HEIFERS.
OBERON
TWO LECTURES
BULL MOUTH!!!
HORSES!
COWS.
SALE.
SHADOW
WALL

A Preface to Dickens

Allan Grant

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The late ALLAN GRANT was Senior Lecturer in the Department of Humanities at Chelsea College, University of London. His speciality was English literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is the author of the volume on Coleridge in the 'Preface' series, now unfortunately out of print.

Foreword

The size of Dickens's output forbids comprehensive treatment in a volume of this scope but Allan Grant has selected those areas that he believes to be most valuable towards an understanding of his developing art. In recent years academic opinion and industry have made many assumptions about the growth of the novelist's psychology and realism and given them the currency that Mr Grant would prefer to question or to reject. This is his firm statement of belief which can hardly be bettered as a motive for embarking upon a volume to substantiate it. 'His novels are the product of an intelligent, humanely sensitive, imaginative vision of life, determined neither by his childhood nor by the times in which he lived.'

Part One of the study reveals Dickens the reformer and humanitarian but culminates more unusually in a stimulating section on the literature of Victorian London life which was the testing ground or seedbed of his artistry. Therein he encountered the institutionalized images of offices, shops and prisons with all their inmates and also the entertainments and domesticities which are the special realm of Dickensian light relief. The two worlds of Mr Wemmick in *Great Expectations* are shown as a comic example of this dual life and it is in that novel that Mr Grant finds the centre of his critical estimate of the author as a whole. There the treatment of childhood, so realistic as to convince readers that a child might have written it, is properly understood as a continuation of the search for innocence and experience inaugurated previously by Romantic poets such as Blake and Wordsworth and now the central thread in the world of Victorian fiction. Here the novel is also the poem.

Also in Part Two I would single out the close readings of sections of Dickens's prose. The style that is so unmistakable is nevertheless rarely examined as helpfully as here.

To our deepest regret Allan Grant died before being able to correct the proofs of this book. Readers of his earlier *Preface to Coleridge* will find the same cogency of argument and concern for the student seeking a critical path through the complex works of literature. Dickens was indeed an author for whom he had the fullest admiration and he completed his articulation of that respect, fortunately for the reader, a short time before his final illness.

MAURICE HUSSEY General Editor

Introduction

The traditional view of the novels of Dickens is that they contain humour and pathos, exciting plots and a parade of characters who are larger than life in their improbabilities and eccentricities. It follows that the tendency implicit in such a view is to prefer the earlier to the later work. It is exemplified in John Forster's *Life of Dickens* written shortly after the novelist's death which places *David Copperfield* at the pinnacle of his achievement.

Recent serious criticism, on the other hand, has tended to value the later novels above the earlier and to see a developing seriousness of concern and a growing mastery of technique and organisation from novel to novel. Within this larger change of view, there is a great variety of approaches and differences of judgment about the kinds of serious pleasure and meaning to be derived from the novels. Some studies emphasise the relationship between Dickens and the history of the nineteenth century, others that between the work and the life in attempts to interpret the work as psychologically dependent on the man's experience.

To those historicist critics of literature who assume that all human activities are ground out by an inevitable, if sometimes superficially disorderly, movement of historical forces in one decisive direction I can only respond that the writer of genius transcends his own time and that great literature, therefore, is always contemporary. If, on the other hand, it is asserted that the writer is some kind of neurotic and that his works are always referrable to early life experiences which are the reality underlying the imaginative work that is only the 'sublimation' or illusory appearance, then I must think that modern varieties of psychological theories of the imagination are simply inadequate to account for phenomena as complex as works of art. For it is clear to me, if anything is clear about Dickens, that his novels are the product of an intelligent, humanely sensitive, imaginative vision of life, determined neither by his childhood nor by the times in which he lived. Indisputable as it is that he used his own experiences, friends, glimpses of chance acquaintances as materials for his novels, what I hope to show in the following pages is that these materials are transformed into art. It is an art of an idiosyncratic, uneven and paradoxical kind, but it is art and not 'native woodnotes wild'. It is also not automatic writing.

The paradoxes are plentiful. He was the most popular writer of his own day and yet he did not always give his public what he thought it wanted. Yet there is never a hint of condescension in what he writes. If confirmation were required to show that he was a con-

scious artist, it lies in the fact that he never repeated himself. Each novel is a fresh beginning, a departure from what had already been achieved. The changes entail changes of technique, an increase in the complex notion of what a fictional character is, and a deepening exploration of moral judgments made firmly through the action. Judgments are not only made, but become part of the process and are qualified to the extent that they can sometimes be reversed. Sir Leicester Dedlock in *Bleak House* is a good example of the process.

The paradox can be stated differently if one thinks of Dickens's work in relation to his own time. For all his continuous popularity, there was no more radical and often bitter critic of his own time. His spirit opposed the major tendencies of both evangelical puritanism and utilitarian calculation which between them characterised Victorian society. Henry James saw this feature as one of the significant differences between his own position as a novelist in America and Dickens's and Thackeray's in England. Equally important in any consideration of Dickens in his time is one's sense that our view of the society of Victorian England in the middle years of the nineteenth century was created for us by Dickens. He makes it visible and gives it the form by which we recognise it. As adjectives, 'Dickensian' and 'Victorian' are almost synonymous.

And yet not quite, as about 'Dickensian' plays is an atmosphere of pathos, of humour and, above all, of fantasy that enlarges it and removes it from historical or social accountability.

That he should have remained, across the intervening century and its accelerating changes in the ways in which the world we live in is perceived and described, a most popular story-teller and inventor of characters which we still know better than many of our close friends, is witness to the transcendence of his art and a powerful strand of continuity in the human condition to which he originally addressed himself.

To talk satisfactorily about the art is not easy. Despite Forster's emphatic assertion that Dickens was a serious artist rather than a popular entertainer, Dickens talked and, in his letters, wrote more frequently about the craft and profession of letters than about art in any consciously deliberate fashion. He does not appear to have articulated any considered theory of art, his own or in more general terms. Through the character of Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend*, and in Tigg Montague's dinner for Jonas Chuzzlewit in *Martin Chuzzlewit* where Shakespeare is the subject of discussion, Dickens wittily satirises attitudes he despised. Yet there is not much in the pages of Dickens that could not comfortably be offered to Podsnap's Young Person. If, like Matthew Arnold, he attacked Victorian philistinism, then it is still the case that he shared many of the attitudes to art and life of the rising middle classes of that period.

To Forster he revealed an anxiety that his writing should be

'realistic'. Yet to say only that is to say nothing. Dickens is not a realist in either the special technical sense or the more general and more difficult sense of that over-used word. More helpful is the comment he makes in a letter of reply to an aspiring contributor to *Household Words* on her 'manner of relating the tale. The people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action. You are too much their exponent; what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves.' (To Miss King, 9 February 1855).

The purposes of Dickens's novels work themselves out in the characters and what they do and say. The method is dramatic and his exemplar is Shakespeare to whom his novels are indebted at many levels, not only at that of those uproarious parodies of Shakespearean performances that his characters put up with on occasion. His preoccupation with the relationships between parents and children is Shakespearean in its mode, and the mechanical business of plot construction occasionally provides muted echoes of a memory or a borrowing. It has always seemed to me, for example, that *The Chimes* owes something to the plot of *The Winter's Tale* despite all the differences of setting and authorial idiom in its abrupt reversion from the darkness of the dream to the brightness and promise of the day.

To Shakespeare and the eighteenth-century English novelists of the picaresque I want also to add an emphasis on the importance of the work of the English Romantic Poets to his vision of life which, as it develops from its beginnings in comic facetiousness and exuberance, becomes poetic in its concentration and intensification.

To say as much is not to dismiss his early writings. It is the mark of the great artist that his apprentice pieces have in them already an authority and distinctness that inform them even when such pieces are themselves close imitations of the work of earlier artists. In chapter thirty-two of *The Pickwick Papers* that Tony Weller should express views on art at all is comically unlikely: that he should emerge at that moment as a fiercely energetic proponent of a Wordsworthian naturalism in the matter of diction is a wild, yet convincing absurdity.

Although I agree with W. H. Auden's dictum that the relations between a writer's life and his work are oblique and best ignored, the account of his life which follows portrays the life as an example of a Victorian success story and as an introduction to the complexities of Victorian life and thought. Just as his own experience provided the occasion for a freely invented, imaginative art, so Dickens acted out his life and made his art at the very centre of his age. It is a contention of what follows that he speaks equally powerfully to our own; his accounts of modern urban life and of what it is like to grow up in towns are perfectly familiar to us.

I have followed the general format of the series in that Part One contains the biographical material, Part Two pursues critically a central concern — that of childhood — and a central, frequently

discussed novel, *Great Expectations*. In it examples of Dickens's prose are also presented and discussed. Part Three contains background and related information together with references to further critical guides in the inexhaustible pleasure of tracing for oneself the extent and significance of Dickens's achievement as a novelist.

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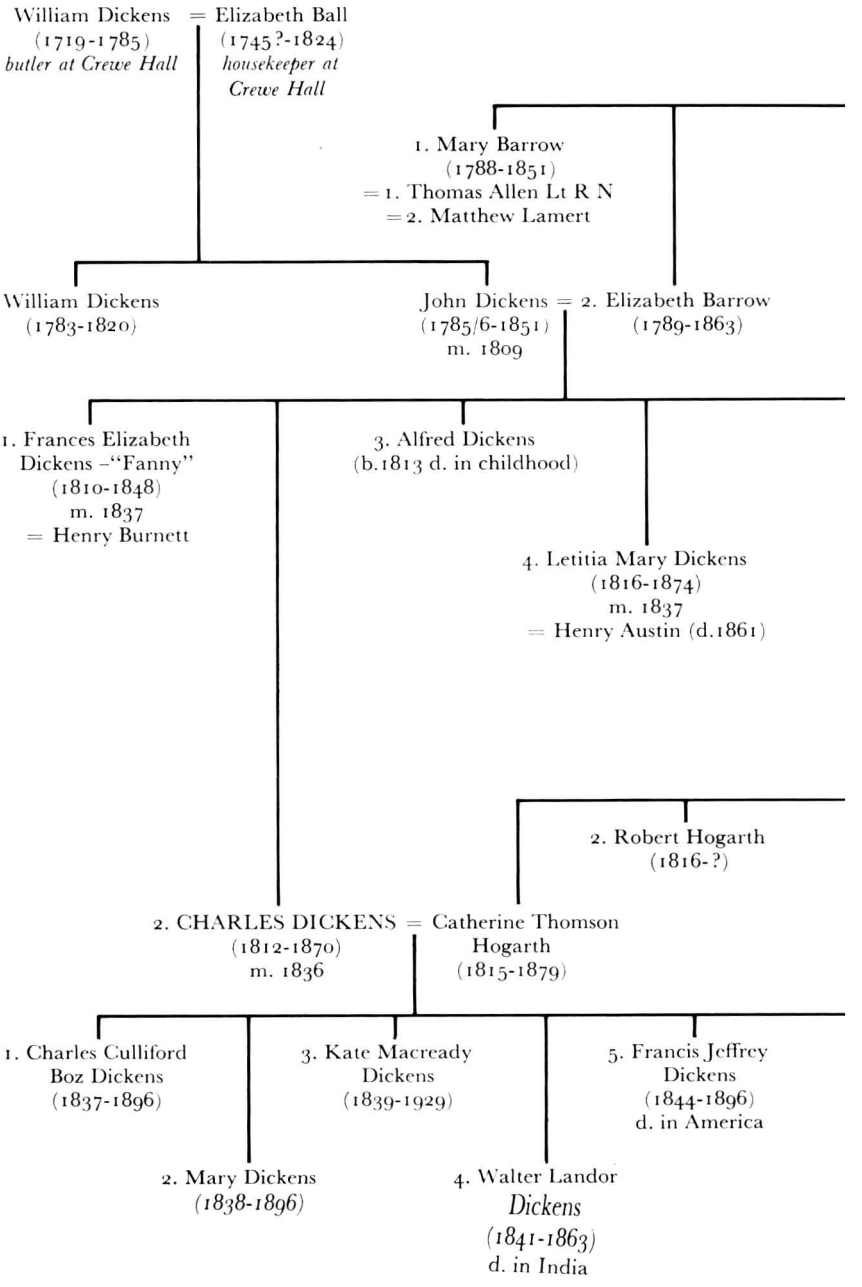
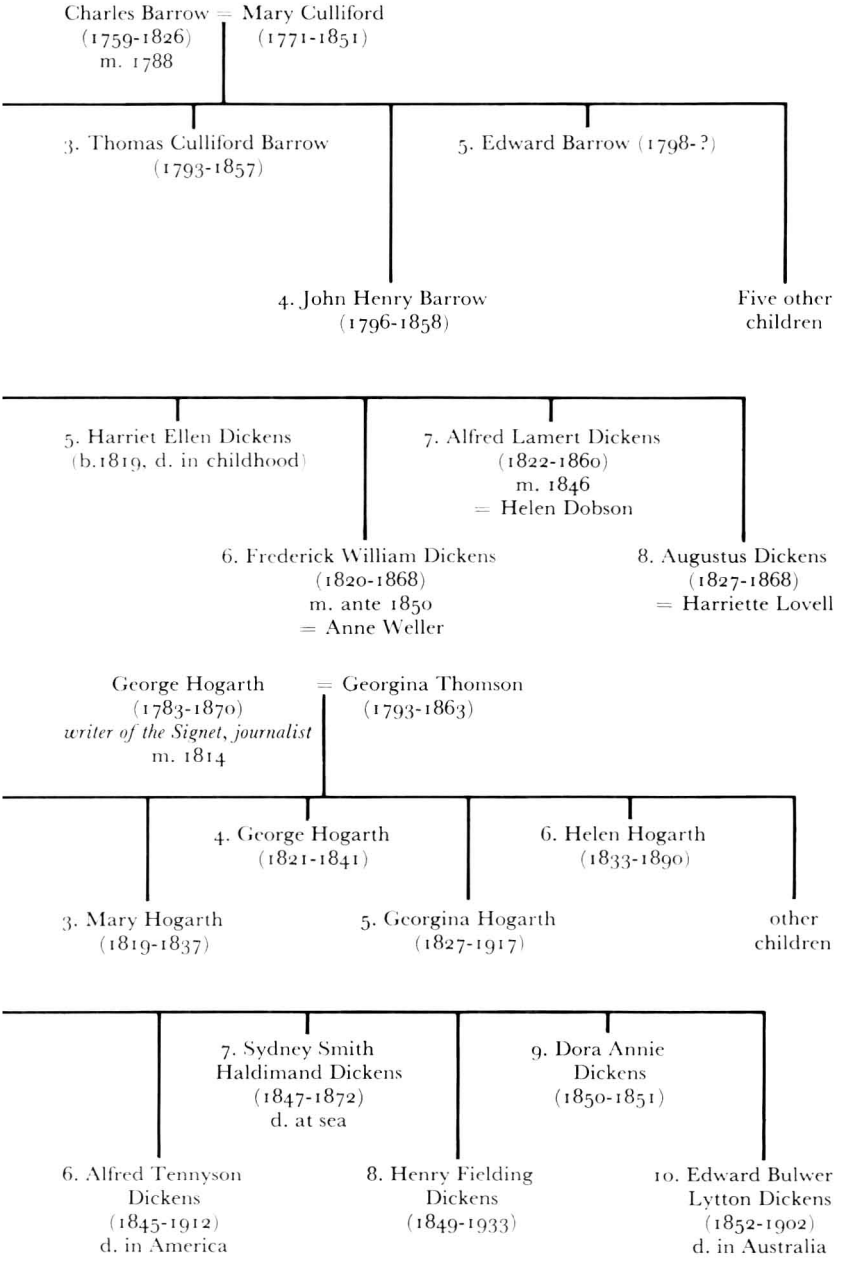


The Dickenses, The Barrows, and the Hogarths



Chronological table

	LIFE AND WORKS	RELATED EVENTS AND BACKGROUND
1812	Charles John Huffam Dickens, the second of eight children, born 7 February to John and Elizabeth Dickens, at Portsmouth.	Robert Browning born. Byron's *Childe Harolde's Pilgrimage*. Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. The Duke of Wellington conducts the Peninsular Campaign. The Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, is assassinated in the House of Commons. US declares war on Britain. Napoleon takes Moscow, but has to retreat.
1813		Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Shelley's *Queen Mab*. Wellington wins the battle of Vittoria, thereby driving the French out of Spain.
1814	John Dickens posted to London for a short period.	Walter Scott's *Waverley*. Wordsworth's *The Excursion*. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Napoleon abdicates after the Allies take Paris and is banished to Elba. Congress of Vienna formally opened. George Stephenson builds an efficient steam locomotive.
1815	Catherine Hogarth, later Dickens's wife, born.	Anthony Trollope born. Napoleon returns from Elba for the 'Hundred Days' but is defeated at Waterloo and goes into exile on St Helena. Congress of Vienna concluded. Corn Laws passed in Parliament to protect the price of home-produced wheat.

1816		Charlotte Brontë born. Jane Austen's *Emma*. S. T. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (written 1797). Walter Scott's *Old Mortality*.
1817	John Dickens is moved to Chatham, where Charles goes to school.	Jane Austen dies. G. F. Watts born. John Leech born. S. T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. *Blackwood's Magazine* founded. Habeas Corpus suspended following a secret Parliamentary report that insurrection is imminent after rioting against prices up and down England.
1818		Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* and *Rob Roy*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.
1819		John Ruskin born. Charles Kingsley born. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) born. The Peterloo massacre occurs when militia charge on a Manchester crowd demonstrating in favour of Parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Corn Laws.
1820		George III dies and is succeeded by the Prince Regent as George IV. Florence Nightingale born. Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Charles Lamb's *Essays of Elia*.
1821		John Keats dies. Feodor Dostoevsky born. Shelley's *Adonais*. Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

1822	John Dickens is transferred to London and the family lodge in Camden Town.	Shelley dies. Matthew Arnold born. Royal Academy of Music founded.
1823	Mrs Dickens tries to open a Young Ladies School at 4 Gower Street. John Dickens is arrested for debt and imprisoned in the Marshalsea where he is joined by his wife and younger children. Charles lodges alone and is sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory. Following his father's release, Charles is sent to school after his sister Fanny goes to the Royal Academy of Music.	*Forget-me-not*, the earliest illustrated annual published. First Mechanics' Institute founded by George Birkbeck.
1824		W. S. Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*. National Gallery, London, founded. *Westminster Review* appears.
1825	John Dickens retires from Admiralty service with a small pension.	W. Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age*. George Stephenson builds 'The Rocket' and starts the first passenger-carrying railway line.
1826	John Dickens becomes a reporter for the *British Press*.	
1827	Charles Dickens joins a firm of solicitors as a clerk.	William Blake dies. Ludwig van Beethoven dies. Baedeker's first travel guide published.
1828		George Meredith born. Leo Tolstoy born. Franz Schubert dies.
1829		Balzac begins *La Comédie Humaine*. Roman Catholic Relief Bill passed by both Houses of Parliament.