



A COMPANION TO  
**CHARLES  
DICKENS**

EDITED BY  
**DAVID PAROISSIEN**

A COMPANION TO  
CHARLES *D*ICKENS

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## Preface

On the matter of prefaces, Dickens sided with Henry Fielding. Be honest about what you have provided, Fielding wrote in his "Introduction" to *Tom Jones* (1750). Let customers peruse the "Bill of Fare," and then make their decision. They will either "stay and regale" themselves with "the Entertainment" provided by the host, or they will depart elsewhere. In a variation of these words, Dickens stated a similar principle when he advised Richard Henry Horne on "the expediency of the preface" Horne had sent him. Don't undercut what you have written with an elaborate justification, Dickens urged. Discerning readers understand that an author or editor "makes a weak case when he writes to explain his writing" (*Letters* 6: 636).

The draft preface in question accompanied a volume of "Minor Poems" for which Horne failed to find a publisher. The advice Dickens gave, however, was sound. Provide too much by way of explanation, and a lengthy preface will take a book "by the throat and strangle it." Of this, Dickens was "quite certain – absolutely sure" – in fact. Keep the preface short and let the contents of the volume "rest manfully and calmly" on what the work has to offer. Readers, like diners, will make their choice.

This *Companion* offers a range of focal points posited on the assumption that factual and referential knowledge from many fields will enhance one's engagement with Dickens's works. Dickens was, is, and will remain a hugely entertaining writer. His fiction is readily accessible without expert guidance. One can read him in ignorance of literary theory; one can invoke the theory of one's preference and read with equal pleasure. Feminists will focus on patriarchy and male domination. Adherents of cultural studies will blur boundaries between low and high cultures. Reader-response practitioners will have their way with the text as well. All readings, however, draw on knowledge of some kind, be it social, historical, cultural, literary, linguistic, or legal.

It is the aim of this volume to provide a selection of contexts, arranged in five sections, which readers can choose to explore with profit. To engage Dickens with understanding, one needs to know something of the man, of the literary education he

acquired, largely through self-directed reading, and of the age in which he lived and about which he remains perhaps one of the most widely informed observers. His 15 novels speak for themselves. The authors of this group of essays follow the editor's injunction to avoid any single interpretative or theoretical orientation and treat the principal literary, artistic, and thematic issues of each work. What readers – common and professional – have made of his novels forms the focus of the three essays in the closing section.

Contributors provide details of the works they cite. Readers should note, however, that the suggestions for further reading are simply that. The sheer volume of available material makes impossible in a collection of this length a full bibliographical record of pertinent essays, books, and studies in print. For those who wish to look backwards to admirable guides furnished some years ago but still worth consulting, they would do well to start with Ada Nisbet's "Charles Dickens" (1966). In a later volume, Philip Collins followed with another informative and readable chapter on Dickens in *Victorian Fiction* (1978). Other sources deserve mention: studies devoted to material on a single novel (the annotated Garland Dickens Bibliographies), the first of four volumes of annotated bibliographies of Dickens materials undertaken by Duane DeVries (2004), the yearly survey of publications provided by *Dickens Studies Annual*, and the open checklist published in *Dickens Quarterly*.

Each has its merits and its limitations; collectively, they constitute the means of surveying an impressive record of writing, past and current, of materials missed by entering a sought term or title into an electronic database and accepting the result. Internet resources grow in sophistication and effectiveness. Search engines and the availability of digitalized texts augment literary research and will continue to extend their utility. No one method or printed source, however, will suffice, just as surely as the essays in this volume provide no final word on any one of the featured topics. Rather, each offers readers an opportunity to acquaint themselves with topics set before them. The Bill of Fare is plain to read. May "good digestion" wait on appetite, "And health on both!" (*Macbeth* III. iv. 38).

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*David Paroissien*

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# Abbreviations

Forster	John Forster, <i>The Life of Charles Dickens</i> (3 vols., London: Chapman and Hall, 1872–4). New edition, with notes and index by A. J. Hoppé. London: Dent, 1966. References are to book and chapter only.
<i>Journalism</i>	<i>Dickens' Journalism</i> , ed. Michael Slater (4 vols., Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1994–2000).
Kaplan	<i>Charles Dickens' Book of Memoranda: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile of the Notebook begun in January 1855</i> , ed. Fred Kaplan (New York: New York Public Library, 1981).
<i>Letters</i>	The Pilgrim Edition of <i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, et al. (12 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2003).
<i>Oxford Dickens</i>	<i>Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens</i> , ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
<i>Speeches</i>	<i>The Speeches of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

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