

# THE DICKENS WORLD

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HUMPHRY HOUSE



No. 9

*Oxford Paperbacks*

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BY  
HUMPHRY HOUSE

SECOND EDITION

LONDON  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4,*

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON

BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI KUALA LUMPUR

CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI ACCRA

FIRST PUBLISHED 1941

SECOND EDITION 1942

REPRINTED 1950

FIRST ISSUED IN *Oxford Paperbacks* 1960

REPRINTED LITHOGRAPHICALLY IN GREAT BRITAIN

AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD

BY VIVIAN BIDLER

PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

**T**HE reprinting of this book makes it possible to say a few things which should have been said before. The book would never have appeared at all but for the admirable work of Mr. Johnstone-Wilson of the British Museum, who corrected the proofs and checked or supplied a number of references during very difficult times: it owes a great deal to the advice and criticism of Mr. John Sparrow and Mr. D. P. Walker.

The first completed typescript went to America and never came back. An imperfect carbon copy was completed and corrected without reference books, in odd moments 'after duty'; and from this the text was set up. Chapters I and VII badly need rearrangement, but for many reasons, both on the publishers' side and on my own, it has not been possible to make any major alterations: a few slips have been put right, a few sentences re-shaped, and a note has been added or altered here and there to make a point clearer. Otherwise the text must stand with no addition but my thanks for the generosity with which friends improved and strangers received it.

HUMPHRY HOUSE

IN THE FIELD

*April 1942*



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## INTRODUCTION

MANY people still read Dickens for his records and criticism of social abuses, as if he were a great historian or a great reformer. Any history, of course, is a splendid field for benevolence and love of justice and indignation; for there they require no action, no awkward politics: but history which is both truth and fiction too, dressed up with caricatures and jokes, set in every kind of devised excitement and pathos, allows uplifting emotions to play upon the past with a freedom that no professed historian could decently encourage. Dickens's novels are now historical documents of this kind; and many readers who would be bored by the reports of the Poor Law Commissioners or Garratt's *Suggestions for a Reform of the Proceedings in Chancery* can look in *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* for pictures of their times, and contributions to the cure of the evils they describe.

In addition to this, few English novelists have been treated with such respect by the professional historians themselves. He is quoted often as indicating the trend of opinion and taste, but also on matters of fact, not merely because his familiar words will give extra point to an illustration from another source, but because his words are so often the best illustration to be had. And as history filters down from original researchers and creative historians through the various strata of text-books, references to Dickens become more frequent (one might add more careless), and of proportionately greater importance. The extreme is reached in one of the most popular History Text-Books for children between the ages of 11 and 14; the whole introductory chapter to the nineteenth century is given to Dickens, starting with a portrait and a short biography. The

novels are then quoted to illustrate the following things: debtors' prisons, child-labour, street-boys, workhouses, gas-lighting, London traffic and fogs, the new police force, the Courts of Law, Government offices, country carts, stage-coaches, inns, nursing, railways, parliamentary elections, and education. These various topics are held together by this paragraph:

The great novelist, like others of his time, was a reformer. His stories, whether sad or humorous, often served as a protest against the abuses of the social and political life of his time. As we read the following chapters, we shall see how many of the abuses against which Dickens protested were gradually removed during the nineteenth century and afterwards.

Dickens history is inseparable from Dickens reformism.

That paragraph is a good example of the mild complacency which often accompanies and even accentuates an interest in Dickens's exposure of past abuses: self-congratulation harmonizes only too easily with the Christmas spirit. Debtors are no longer jailed; money-lenders are more strictly supervised; and a parish-boy who asks for more can be sent to a clinic for analysis. Good as the old days were, the new are in some ways better, and Dickens helped to make them so. But while it is generally accepted that Dickens did a great deal of good, there is a genial vagueness about what exactly he did and how he did it. It is easy to smile when a foreign propagandist quotes Mr. Squeers as a typical modern English schoolmaster, but it is not so easy to say what was exactly the point of Dickens's satire in the early part of *Oliver Twist*.

Several English writers (apart from the general critics like Gissing and Chesterton) have dealt with this question of Dickens's history and reformism; but, they have nearly all interpreted Dickens more through their own beliefs than through the beliefs of his time.

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Mr. Edwin Pugh in *Charles Dickens, Apostle of the People*, published in 1908, set out, with great sense and knowledge, to show the socialist implications of his work; Mr. T. A. Jackson's *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical* (1937) argues that at his death he was all but a Marxian Communist, and so on. But only M. Cazamian's *Le Roman Social en Angleterre 1830-1850* attempts in any detail to show Dickens's social and political writing in connexion with its contemporary setting of ideas; and by some accident it seems as if this book has not affected English writers as much as it might have done.

'Dickensian' scholarship—a unique accretion for an English author—is in one sense or another largely historical. It is concerned to identify persons and places in the novels and stories, to discover 'originals'. The proper interest of such discoveries is only in their relevance either to Dickens's own biography or to the social history behind his novels: and in recent years nearly all the most valuable work has been biographical.

The novels themselves are, of course, a primary source for the life. Charles Dickens was the child of Mr. Micawber (with a touch of Dorrit) and Mrs. Nickleby. He lodged for a time with Mrs. Pipechin. As a youth he fell in love with Dora, who grew up into Flora. For the biographer such identifications as these are of the greatest value; for we know more about John Dickens from *David Copperfield*, and more about Mrs. Winter from *Little Dorrit*, than from any other source. But the interest of a writer not concerned with personal biography depends upon the fullness of knowledge that other sources can give, so that he may trace the process of imaginative transformation from the supposed original to the fiction. For him, Mr. Micawber is less important than Harold Skimpole. But Dickens never wrote a *roman à clef*.

The *roman à clef* proper deals with public characters,

and the best examples of it in Victorian literature are Disraeli's; but his imagination was as different from Dickens's as it could be. The mistake he made in *Lothair* would have been utterly impossible for Dickens. The character of Mgr. Catesby was so closely based on a fashionable priest of the 'sixties named Capel that in one place Disraeli actually wrote Capel instead of Catesby, and the mistake was published in the edition of 1870, Vol. III, p. 254. He was so using his memory of a living man that in the moment of writing he could forget the thin disguise. Dickens's method was exactly the opposite; instead of speaking about real people as if they were fictions, he spoke about his fictions as if they were real people. We can often watch in his letters the characters growing under his hands. Leigh Hunt, no doubt, gave him the seed of Skimpole, but a great deal else was grafted on to what sprang from it, and the interest in a detailed study of the case would be to see how the grafting was done.

With Dickens, the more exact identifications are often less interesting than the more imperfect; and the historical value of those characters whom he himself admitted to be based on actual people or who have been tracked down by later research may lie least in the points of detail that suggest the 'originals'. A good deal of Squeers was Stone, of the Cheeryble Brothers the Grants, of Merdle Sadleir; but the historical value of the originals is something less than the historical value of what Dickens made of them. In this sense even mistaken identifications may become important. For instance, the writer who first suggested that Mrs. Jellyby was taken from Harriet Martineau was probably wrong; but the mistake had fruitful sense in it.

The topographical interests of Dickensians are sometimes less easy to understand. One editor of *Little Dorrit*, for example, after mentioning Merdle and 'the Sadlier (*sic*) affair' adds, 'However, the allusion, whatever

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it was, is of no interest nowadays,' yet he goes on to write pages of detailed chat about all the streets and houses and churches mentioned in the book as if their interest were incontestable. Topographical scholarship and guesswork have long been surprisingly persistent and popular. Merely looking along my own shelves I can see these titles: *Dickens's London*, *The London of Charles Dickens*, *Dickensian Inns and Taverns*, *In Kent with Charles Dickens*, *The Kent of Dickens*, *A Week's Tramp in Dickens Land*. In the Centenary Year, 1912, Thos. Cook & Son ran a 'Whole day drive in Dickens' London' every Thursday during the summer: 'Inclusive Fare, Providing Table d'Hôte Luncheon at City Restaurant, Tea at Hampstead, all Admission Fees and Gratuities, and Services of Guide-Lecturer throughout, 15s., \$3.60,' and a day tour to Canterbury and Rochester for a guinea. Even now, various branches of the Dickens Fellowship organize 'Rambles' every season.

The most curious instance of the passion for localizing is the small half-timbered house in Portsmouth Street off Kingsway, which still protests to the world that it is the Old Curiosity Shop immortalized by Charles Dickens, though he plainly said that *his* shop was pulled down over a hundred years ago; it was pulled down before the end of the novel. There would not be money in this fiction unless customers still wanted to believe it.

This topographical inquisitiveness has done a great deal to stabilize a quite misleading conception of what was the Dickens 'period'. Nearly all the energy and ingenuity is devoted to hunting out the buildings which were already old when Dickens wrote about them. Inns, churches, old houses like Mrs. Clennam's and the curiosity shop, the Inns of Court, Rochester Castle, Tellson's Bank—these are the usual objects of the indefatigable tourist and sightseer. But what of the

railway stations and viaducts and suburban villas and new hotels? Did Dickens live entirely in a world of reminiscence, and utterly fail to assimilate for imaginative purposes the prodigious changes that were taking place in every detail of the world he lived in; or did he wilfully reject them?

This book will attempt to show in a broad and simple way the connexion between what Dickens wrote and the times in which he wrote it, between his reformism and some of the things he wanted reformed, between the attitude to life shown in his books and the society in which he lived. It will be concerned a good deal with facts, and illustrated with quotations from miscellaneous sources; for it is only in such details that a writer's environment can be seen and his purposes understood; the exact language of contemporaries alone can have the authentic tone and idiom necessary to conviction. With an author so variously and intricately wound into the history of his time the working of his imagination can often best be seen from others' views of the events with which he started. And Dickens himself is far more factual than might appear; the best commentaries on many parts of his novels are his own articles and short stories, and articles and stories that he supervised as editor. So there will be many quotations from his minor works and from his own journals, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.<sup>1</sup>

A survey of this kind is hampered by the extremely technical nature of much that should be included in it. To be understood thoroughly Dickens should be followed into many different by-ways of history where only professional specialists can safely tread; two such by-ways will not be entered in this book. The details

<sup>1</sup> In the cheaper editions the Minor Works are reprinted in such various selections and rearrangements that it has seemed best not to attempt to give references to any volume: references are therefore given only to the periodical in which the essay first appeared. Complete sets of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* can still be bought for a few shillings.

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of Dickens's treatment of the Law cannot safely be discussed by any one who is not a trained lawyer;<sup>1</sup> his treatment of schools and education will be omitted because, for various reasons, it has been impossible to collect the necessary material.

For some years past, criticism—and more particularly what is called 'Literary History'—has been becoming more sociological. It is a truism, which no critic has ever doubted, that a great writer is a product of the social forces of the time in which he lives, and that he also reflects and modifies them in his work. To say so much is to say little more than that 'literature is inseparable from life'—the stale caution with which every literary scholar for the past century has prefaced his clinical analyses. Literature is inseparable from life, he says, but let us look at certain aspects of it. As detailed knowledge accumulates and is departmentalized, these 'aspects' become further removed, each from each, and all from the general history of the time. The emphasis of literary history has shifted from 'influences' traced as a kind of genealogical descent from one major writer to another, to biography which seeks out sources of creation in the psychological details of each writer's life; and it is shifting now again to the social and economic environment in which particular works have been produced. This recent shift is illustrated in the *Introductions to English Literature* by Professor Bonamy Dobree and Miss Edith Batho. Their volume *The Victorians and After* (1938) contains a great deal that is extremely relevant to this book, but one specific judgement on Dickens needs a separate comment:

The pity is that this giant never grew up intellectually. . . . Where Dickens touched upon social reform, anywhere in fact where he began to think, he falls below the level of the

<sup>1</sup> Sir William Holdsworth's *Charles Dickens as a Legal Historian* is the best book on the subject.



second-rate, though the generous indignation that he shows is worthy of a full and complete man.

It is proper to ask whether, if it is true that his treatment of social reform is immature and lacking in thought, it may not be one of the main duties of historical criticism to try to explain why it was so. Whether it is true or not, the fact remains that an immense number of his contemporaries—not all of them fools by the standards of the time—took his reformism seriously; and immense numbers after him—perhaps not all so wise—have continued to do so. Criticism of this kind, if it is to explain a period, has to account for its failures and mistakes.

The word 'Dickens' in the title of this book is used as an adjective, as when somebody says he has had a Dickens Christmas. What that conveys varies very widely indeed according to the taste and reading of those who hear it: but popularly it suggests a frosty morning; coaches; delightful inn at the end of the stage; portly landlord; smiling barmaid; brandy by the fire-side; smoking joints; good time for all. Hard upon these *Pickwick* items follow mixed impressions of poverty and good cheer and tears of happiness from the *Christmas Books*. To call a man a Dickens person would popularly mean that he was of the *Pickwick*-*Fezziwig*-*Cheeryble* type. The old coaching days, inns, and fat humorous, benevolent men are the main features exploited with so little mercy when any publican or shopkeeper or collector for charity decides to work up a Dickens spirit. Here is the verdict of Mrs. Baillie Saunders, authoress of *The Philosophy of Dickens* (Glaisher, 1905):

People say now as often as ever of a neighbourhood, or a room, 'How Dickens it looks,' or 'Do not alter your house, it is so Dickens.' I have heard over and over again, 'He is such a dear old fellow—he is so Dickens.' Things need