

THE WORLD'S CL



CHARLES DICKENS

David Copperfield



*Edited with an introduction
and notes by*
NINA BURGIS

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INTRODUCTION

IN the Preface to *David Copperfield* published with the conclusion of the serial, Dickens addressed his readers not with an explanation or defence of some aspect of his tale but with a brief and heartfelt appeal for sympathy. There he told 'the reader whom I love' how hard it was for him on this occasion to avoid 'personal confidences, and private emotions', and confided to him that when the pen is finally laid down 'an Author feels as if he were dismissing some part of himself into the shadowy world.' The day before (21 October 1850), with the end of the book in sight, he had made the same admission more directly to one particular reader:

Oh, my dear Forster, if I were to say half of what *Copperfield* makes me feel tonight, how strangely, even to you, I should be turned inside out! I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World.

Since 1837 Forster had been Dickens's literary adviser as well as friend and had read all his books in proof. His relation to *David Copperfield*, however, was peculiarly intimate, for behind that 'even to you' lay a time when he had been the recipient of 'personal confidences, and private emotions' about experiences of Dickens's childhood which were later embodied in the novel.

Copperfield is not fictionalized autobiography, but its inception and nature were bound up with Dickens's thinking and writing, over a period of years, about his own past; a landmark in this process was Forster's response to the fragment of autobiography Dickens had written. The autobiographical fragment has not survived. Dickens himself told Mrs. Winter (the former Maria Beadnell) in 1855 that he had begun to write his own life, just before *Copperfield*, but when he came within sight of the years when he had loved her so devotedly (1829-33) he 'lost courage and burned the rest'. Extensive quotations from a version of the autobiography appear, however, in the second chapter of Forster's *Life*; his sources were 'proof-sheets of the novel interlined at the time' and, perhaps, early drafts; these left 'blanks', which he filled from letters and from recollections of what Dickens had told him in conversation.

The events at the heart of the autobiography were those of 1823-4, although it may have included memories of earlier years, and have continued—as the letter to Mrs. Winter implies—into Dickens's young manhood. In the winter of 1822-3 the Dickens family removed from Chatham (where Charles had spent the years between five and ten and which he remembered as a paradise) to London, living at first in the

dreary neighbourhood of Bayham Street, Camden Town. John Dickens had long been unable to live within his income (further reduced as a consequence of his transfer to London), and in February 1824 he was arrested for debt and imprisoned in the Marshalsea. Just before his arrest Charles—after a year without education or occupation—had become like David Copperfield ‘a little labouring hind’ in Warren’s blacking-warehouse, owned and managed by the Lamerts, connections by marriage of Mrs. Dickens. He remained there for some weeks after his father’s release from the Marshalsea at the end of May, and was convinced that had it not been for a quarrel between his father and James Lamert he might not even then have been removed and sent to school.

Once the apparently endless months at Warren’s were over the family never referred to or explained them: Dickens’s incomprehension, resentment and shame made his sufferings a secret he could share with no one. The conclusion of the fragment as given by Forster reveals by what slow and painful stages Dickens came to record his memories of that time:

Until old Hungerford-market was pulled down, until old Hungerford-stairs were destroyed, and the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began. I never saw it. I could not endure to go near it. For many years, when I came near to Robert Warren’s in the Strand, I crossed over to the opposite side of the way, to avoid a certain smell of the cement they put upon the blacking-corks, which reminded me of what I was once. It was a very long time before I liked to go up Chandos-street. My old way home by the Borough made me cry, after my eldest child [*Charley, b. 6 January 1837*] could speak.

In my walks at night I have walked there often, since then, and by degrees I have come to write this.

From the first the knowledge he had so unwillingly acquired of a London unknown to most of his readers—struggling poverty, debtors’ prisons, St. Giles’s and its criminals—had enriched his writings; towards the end of 1843, with *A Christmas Carol*, the beginnings of reflection on his own past and the nature of memory also entered his fiction. That Dickens’s mind was running on the past in 1844–5 is indicated by Forster, who may then have been told about some early memories (his mother’s teaching, his reading) which found their way into *Copperfield*. In July 1844 Dickens began a year of residence and travel in Italy, free from the commitment to begin another novel, for which he fought with a desperate energy. During that time he responded to a request for biographical information from the French critic Amédée Pichot by saying that he had long intended to write his own life—a response he had already made to a similar request in 1842; and

the longed-for leisure among strange sights and people may well have led to a first attempt at carrying out that intention.

For the writing of an account of his early life, not to be published during his lifetime, Dickens had a precedent to which he would have attached great significance: Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, published in 1837, began with such a fragment, written in 1808. Lockhart's discovery of the manuscript among Scott's papers after his death may have been in Dickens's mind when, in November 1846, he first mentioned the project to Forster:

Shall I leave you my life in MS when I die? There are things in it that would touch you very much, and that might go on the same shelf with the first volume of Holcroft's.

The question followed the admission that Mrs. Pipchin's establishment in the recently completed third number of *Dombey and Son* was 'from the life', and the reference to Thomas Holcroft's *Memoirs* (1816) hinted at what was left untold, for in the first volume were described the hardships of Holcroft's boyhood. Some of the 'life in MS' may already have been written when Dickens based Mrs. Pipchin on Mrs. Elizabeth Roylance with whom he had lodged in Camden Town after the rest of the family had joined John Dickens in the Marshalsea. The strongest evidence that a draft had been made before Forster heard the story in 1847, is to be found towards the close of the final passage from the fragment quoted in the *Life*:

From that hour until this at which I write, no word of that part of my childhood which I have now gladly brought to a close, has passed my lips to any human being . . . I have never, until I now impart it to this paper, in any burst of confidence with any one, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped, thank God.

An occasion for raising the curtain for Forster came in 1847, soon after Dickens's return to London and almost daily contact with this close friend. During 1847-8 they relived Dickens's childhood in conversations and letters, so that by May 1848 Dickens was able to look forward to a future when they would speak of these confidences 'wisely and wonderingly' and to say that he was now 'more at rest for having opened all my heart and mind to you'. The easing of the burden of memory was followed, in the winter of 1848, by a working-out of his ideas on the subject in his Christmas book, *The Haunted Man*, and by a return to the autobiography. Forster recorded in his diary on 20 January 1849 his first sight of the fragment 'in its connected shape', and noted: 'No blotting, as when writing fiction; but straight on, as when writing ordinary letter.' He also recorded Dickens's comment: 'The description may make none of the impression on others that the reality made on him

... Highly probable that it may never see the light. No wish. Left to J. F. or others.' Of the impression made on Forster he could have had no doubt; and, although there was no thought of using the autobiography in his fiction, their deep interest in the exchanges of the past eighteen months led Forster to suggest that Dickens should write his next novel in the first person. Dickens's ready acceptance of the suggestion was his first and most important decision about *Copperfield*, for it made available to his fiction, as he came to discover, an instrument of flexibility and power developed during his attempts to write his own life.

The essential preliminary of finding a title for the new story was attended by 'doubts and misgivings to more than the usual degree', commented Forster, to whom were sent versions of the seventeen trial titles now preserved with the manuscript (see Appendix B). All show a return to the 'Life and Adventures' pattern, which gave prominence to the hero's name, instead of crystallizing the leading idea, as those of *Dombey and Son* and the Christmas books had done. Even after 'Thomas Mag' had been replaced by 'David Copperfield' ('I doubt whether I could, on the whole, get a better name'), uncertainty is reflected in the facetiousness of 'Mag's Diversions', 'Copperfield's Entire', 'The Last Living Speech and Confession of David Copperfield . . . Who was never executed at the Old Bailey'; the title regarded as settled—until writing began—is that printed on the cover of the parts (see frontispiece), except that it was to have been prefaced by 'The Copperfield Survey of the World as it Rolled. Being'. Rejected from the lettering, this survives in Browne's cover-design in the image of the baby seated on the 'ER' of 'Copperfield', gazing at a globe below. 'Blunderstone' for the hero's birthplace appears in most titles, confirming the decision to set part of his story in East Anglia, made during a brief visit to Norfolk and Suffolk early in January. Blundeston in Suffolk was simply a name glimpsed on a signpost, but he found the fishing port of Yarmouth, with flat marshes stretching away from it, 'the strangest place in the wide world', and one he must try his hand at; as a setting it had the stimulus of novelty, and also something in common with familiar Chatham. To the sharp impressions he had received on the spot Dickens added preliminary work on the dialect; it has been convincingly demonstrated that his source for most of the dialect words and idioms in the speech of the Yarmouth characters was Major Edward Moor's *Suffolk Words and Phrases* (1823) and that this was used with a discrimination that argues careful study. Some forms ('gorm', 'mavish') may have come from his own observation; and after the first part had appeared natives of East Anglia sent further suggestions, some of them used.

The 'Survey', like the other titles considered, suggested a narrator to whom adventures happened and who encountered and observed scenes and characters; Dickens decided to drop it (and to alter 'Adventures' to

'Experiences' in the short title) when, as Forster tells us, the completion of chapter ii 'defined to himself, more clearly than before, the character of the book; and the propriety of rejecting everything not strictly personal from the name given to it'. The opening admirably established situation, setting and people as the narrator knew them to have been at the time of his birth; when, in chapter ii, the story as his 'written memory' begins, the first-person narrative conveys its events and personages through the consciousness of the child, so far as it can be recaptured by memory, and through the comments of the man remembering, to whom that past self is an object of contemplation. The fresh wonder of the earliest memories called up from 'the blank of infancy' is compressed into a series of images in the present tense (a technique used for the 'Retrospects' occurring at intervals through the book), in which the paradise 'where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden' is authenticated by the past self within it 'bolting furtive gooseberries'; in the continuous narrative that follows, people and events are conveyed almost entirely through the sharp perceptions of the child who 'could observe, in little pieces as it were' without being able to catch anybody in 'a net of a number of those pieces': something that the reader is enabled to do. But the emotions expressed by the narrator about these memories are a foreshadowing of what is to come and an indication of its significance.

His convincing representation of a remembered past Dickens had learned from his autobiographical writings. They had also given him a voice for his narrator, intimate yet without directly addressing the reader as Thackeray did. By the time the first number was written Dickens had found not only a voice but an over-arching structure for the story. A long interpolation in the proof of chapter iii, describing David's walk along the beach with little Em'ly, prepares the reader for her seduction and has the narrator foreshadow it as he recalls her at the end of the breakwater. Dickens's memories had been shaped by what he saw as a betrayal, and this insight informs not only David's account of his banishment from a childhood paradise, but the book's strong story line of the betrayal by Steerforth of the Peggotty family and of his friendship with David, with its long-anticipated climax in the storm scene.

The invented story made it possible for Dickens to draw on his own memories throughout the novel without writing autobiography. The passage in chapter iv describing David's reading was almost identical with a reminiscence sent to Forster some years before, and close to what he says in the preface written in 1848 for the Cheap edition of *Nicholas Nickleby*, about the time when he was 'a not very robust child, sitting in bye-places, near Rochester Castle, with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza'. His head was also full of more

ephemeral tales, including one told in Fenning's *Universal Spelling-book* (appearing in every edition between 1756 and 1847) about the bad boy, Harry, whose response as a dissipated youth to his good brother Tommy's advice is 'I don't care for that', and who ends his life eaten by a lion on the Barbary coast; Steerforth is made to recognize and mockingly dismiss its relevance to himself during the preparation for David's discovery of the truth about his bright and charming friend (ch. xxii). The incorporation of such memories was easy and natural, but Dickens also decided to accept the challenge of using the substance of the autobiographical fragment in chapter xi, something he was preparing for as early as chapter v, when David's age was altered in proof (see p. 739 below) so that he should be ten when he began life on his own account—the age Dickens remembered himself as being when he started work. The decision taken, it was long before he could see his way; but eventually he announced to Forster that he had done it 'ingeniously, and with a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction'. This was achieved through the creation of the Micawbers, a fictional framework which strengthened and transformed the 'truth' about his own childish days; the Micawbers could be enjoyed and laughed at because they were not responsible for David's plight, and in Wilkins Micawber Dickens 'distanced' the qualities that had exasperated and that now delighted him in John Dickens, interweaving truth and fiction to richly comic ends, especially through his 'rhetorical exuberance'. Characteristic extracts from John Dickens's letters appear in Forster's *Life*. There also survives a complete letter, written from Somers Town in 1825 (printed in the *Dickensian*, 1913, p. 148), sending an order for his daughter's fees at the Royal Academy of Music, 'in lieu of present payment':

A circumstance of great moment to me will be decided in the ensuing term which I confidently hope will place me in comparative affluence, and by which I shall be enabled to redeem the order before the period of Christmas.

On this base Micawber was reared, and his separate life within the book is testimony to the freedom conferred on Dickens by the earlier writing out of his resentments.

Humour was also one of the means which enabled him to fictionalize the still fresh and painful memory of his youthful love for Maria Beadnell. In David's recollections of his courtship the first-person narrative is capable of moving without incongruity from the image of Dora among the geraniums, with its celebration of memory—and its deliberate echo of a moment in Murdstone's courtship of his mother—to the comic deflation of Mrs. Crupp's sympathy, warmed by David's brandy. Once they are married, humour brings home the

realities of the new state: David discovers that Dora does wear curl-papers; the young couple are cheated by shopkeepers and cannot find a good servant; when David inevitably assumes Murdstone's role towards the wife who resembles his young mother, his firmness resides in comically frustrated attempts to form Dora's mind. Dickens grew so attached to Dora that he was reluctant to kill her off and allow David's story to reach its planned resolution in a second marriage, releasing him from all sense of 'an unhappy loss or want of something'.

Other, less important, correspondences between people in the novel and actual persons are known: Serjeant Talfourd's contribution to Traddles, for instance, and that of Miss Courts's companion to Rosa Dartle. Talfourd and Hannah Brown may have been pleased and amused, respectively, but another instance caused Dickens serio-comic trouble. Miss Mowcher was based on Mrs. Seymour Hill, a dwarf working as a chiropodist, who had attended Catherine Dickens; so well had Dickens hit her off that Hablot Browne, who had never met her, produced from his description a recognizable illustration, and Browne's son, encountering her many years later, found that her behaviour was 'all quite in the Dickens manner'. Dickens was taken aback by Mrs. Hill's pained remonstrance and threat of legal action, but admitted to Forster that 'one is wrong in being tempted to such a use of power'; her solicitor accepted the pledge that he would alter the character—which he acknowledged he had not meant to be a good one—and the pledge was kept in chapter xxxii, though with reluctance and not without some loss to the novel.

The novel's representation of the workings of memory was strengthened by a consequence of Dickens's decision to incorporate in it his experiences of childhood misery and youthful love. From chapter xi onwards much of the story is set firmly in the London of the 1820s (from Highgate and Camden Town in the north to the Borough in the south) in which he had himself grown up. Many episodes take place in the area between St. Martin-in-the-Fields and the river, since 1830 transformed by the building of Trafalgar Square and improvements to the Strand and by the waterside, where Hungerford Stairs, Warren's warehouse and the Swan all had been swept away. In order that his hero might have left London before these alterations had begun Dickens made David a few years older than himself (David goes abroad before the building of the new London Bridge, 1830-1, when he is about twenty-four). Murdstone & Grinby's warehouse is placed at Blackfriars, but the child David's wanderings are to the west, near Hungerford Stairs, the site of Warren's. He re-encounters Steerforth at the old Golden Cross, and at its back entrance on St. Martin's Lane he sees the listening figure of Martha. The chambers taken for him by his aunt, the scene of 'my first dissipation', are by the river in Buckingham Street (where Dickens had

once lodged); and the emigrants spend their last night in England at the crazy old inn by Hungerford Stairs.

Whenever this is the setting, Dickens's superimposition of past on present London is particularly successful in reinforcing the novel's insights about separateness and continuity between the man remembering and the self remembered.

Public events of the 1820s play no part in the story; when David recalls his days as a Parliamentary reporter it is only to convey the impatient dismissal of politicians felt by his creator, who associated himself with the denunciations of Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (appearing during the first half of 1850) by borrowing his phrase 'parliamentary bagpipes' (ch. xlviii). Some of the social concerns pre-occupying Dickens during 1849-50—and for which he had a platform in his new periodical *Household Words*—found their way into the novel. The continuing scandal of the storage of wills in Doctors' Commons and other cathedral registries, the subject of David's naïve wonder (ch. xxxiii) and criticized in a parliamentary report of 1832, was again a live issue in 1850: in an article in *Household Words* (28 September 1850), 'The Doom of English Wills', Dickens reminded his readers of David's criticisms:

The public have lately heard some trifling facts relative to Doctors' Commons, through the medium of a young gentleman who was articled, by his aunt, to a proctor there.

The two causes nearest his heart, the rehabilitation of 'fallen women' and his belief in emigration as a remedy for unemployment and juvenile crime at home, were linked in his work as coadjutor in Miss Coutts's 'Home for Homeless Women', for the girls whom the home succeeded in redeeming were assisted to make a new life at the Cape and in Australia. Dickens explained to a friend who had protested against Emily's seduction that her history was intended to show the plight of such girls 'in a new and pathetic way'. Moreover her emigration was undertaken in what he considered ideal circumstances: under the protection of her uncle and Mrs. Gummidge, who also take charge of Martha, and in company with the Micawbers—the kind of arrangement promoted by the Family Colonization Loan Society in 1850. Only once is the novelist displaced by the journalist (and led into an anachronism): in the attack on the system of separate confinement, in force at Pentonville prison, opened in 1842 (ch. lxi), following his 'Pet Prisoners' (*Household Words*, 28 April 1850), itself indebted to and endorsing Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlet*, 'Model Prisons'. But the verve with which it is done is disarming, and there is something peculiarly fitting in the final appearance of Heep and Littimer as the 'pet prisoners' of Creakle, the Middlesex magistrate.

That final appearance was a result of Dickens's wish to allow his readers and himself a farewell glimpse of all the personages summoned up by a narrator who has now attained success and security. But when David has claimed Agnes as his own, and stands beside her at the window of the old house in Canterbury, Dickens returns to the memory that had set him to write his own life and brought the novel into being: 'Long miles of road then opened out before my mind; and, toiling on, I saw a ragged way-worn boy, forsaken and neglected.'

In 1867, when he came to write a preface for the Charles Dickens edition of the novel, Dickens found the 'avowals' of his original preface still so true that he could only repeat them, and 'take the reader into one confidence more': 'I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD.'

NINA BURGIS

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N. B.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

ISSUED in monthly parts from 1 May 1849 to 1 November 1850, and in one volume without change except for a list of errata. Appeared in the Cheap edition (1858), Library edition (1859) and Charles Dickens edition (1867), each with a minimum of corrections by Dickens made for copyright purposes. The Charles Dickens edition, on which most modern editions are based, left uncorrected most of the errors of the Cheap edition from which it was printed and added many more. The present text is that of the Clarendon edition, 1981, based on the first, one-volume edition with errata slip. This has been emended in over 100 places from the author's manuscript (in the Forster Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum) where it contains a correct reading overlooked by Dickens when reading proof or where its reading is clearly superior to his proof correction of a printer's error, and in a few instances from corrections made by Dickens in the proofs (also in the Forster Collection) but overlooked by the printer.

A CHRONOLOGY OF CHARLES DICKENS

- 1812 (7 Feb.) Born at Landport, Hants, to John and Elizabeth Dickens
- 1815-17 London
- 1817-22 Chatham, Kent; early education
- 1823- London
- 1824 John Dickens in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison; Dickens employed in Warren's blacking-warehouse
- 1824-7 At Wellington House Academy
- 1827-8 Employed as solicitors' clerk
- ?1829-?1831 Shorthand reporter, at Doctors' Commons; on *Mirror of Parliament*; on *True Sun*
- 1833-4 First stories published in *Monthly Magazine*
- 1834 (Aug.)-1836 (Nov.) Reporter on *Morning Chronicle*; sketches published, collected as *Sketches by Boz*, two series Feb. and Dec. 1836
- 1836 (April)-1837 (Nov.) *Pickwick Papers* (monthly)
- 1836 (2 April) Marries Catherine Hogarth; lives at Furnival's Inn
- 1837 (Jan.)-1839 (Jan.) Edits *Bentley's Miscellany*; *Oliver Twist* (monthly—published complete Nov. 1838)
- 1837 (April)-1839 (Dec.) At 48 Doughty Street. Mary Hogarth dies there, May 1837
- 1838 (April)-1839 (Oct.) *Nicholas Nickleby* (monthly)
- 1839 (Dec.) Moves to 1 Devonshire Terrace
- 1840-1 *Master Humphrey's Clock* (weekly), including *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*; also monthly, April 1840-Nov. 1841
- 1842 (Jan.-June) In North America. *American Notes* (Oct.)
- 1843 (Jan.)-1844 (July) *Martin Chuzzlewit* (monthly)
(Dec.) *A Christmas Carol*
- 1844 (July)-1845 (June) Living in Italy
(Dec.) *The Chimes*
- 1845 (Sept.) First performance by the Amateurs; others, in 1846-8, 1850-1
(Oct.)-1846 (March) Planning, editing and contributing to *Daily News*
(Dec.) *The Cricket on the Hearth*
- 1846 (May) *Pictures from Italy*
(June-Nov.) Living in Switzerland
(Oct.)-1848 (April) *Dombey and Son* (monthly)

- (Nov.)-1847 (Feb.) Living in Paris
 (Dec.) *The Battle of Life*
- 1847 (Nov.) Miss Coutts's 'Home for Homeless Women' opened
- 1848 (Dec.) *The Haunted Man*
- 1849 (May)-1850 (Nov.) *David Copperfield* (monthly)
- 1850 (March) Starts *Household Words* (weekly), editing and contributing regularly
- 1851 (Oct.) Moves to Tavistock House
- 1852 (March)-1853 (Sept.) *Bleak House* (monthly)
- 1854 *Hard Times* (weekly)
- 1855 (Dec.)-1857 (June) *Little Dorrit* (monthly)
- 1856 (March) Buys Gad's Hill Place, Kent
- 1858 (April) Begins Public Readings
 (May) Separates from Mrs. Dickens
- 1859 (April-Nov.) *A Tale of Two Cities* (weekly and monthly)
 (May) *All the Year Round* begins
 (June) *Household Words* ends
- 1860 *The Uncommercial Traveller*
 (Oct.) Final removal to Gad's Hill
 (Dec.)-1861 (Aug.) *Great Expectations* (weekly)
- 1864 (May)-1865 (Nov.) *Our Mutual Friend* (monthly)
- 1867 (Nov.)-1868 (April) Public reading tour in USA
- 1869 (April) Breakdown in provincial reading tour
- 1870 (Jan.-March) Farewell season of Public readings in London
 (April-Sept.) *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (monthly; unfinished)
 (9 June) Dies at Gad's Hill

THE PERSONAL HISTORY
OF
DAVID COPPERFIELD.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. K. BROWNE.

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1850.

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