

A MODERN GUIDE TO BRITAIN'S MOST FAMOUS NOVELIST

The Bedside, 

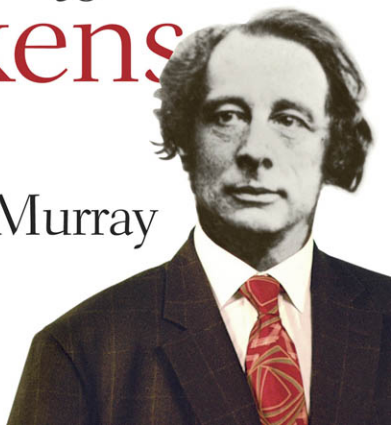
 Bathtub &

Armchair 

Companion
to

Dickens

Brian Murray



The Bedside,
Bathtub & Armchair
Companion to
Dickens



The Bedside,
Bathtub &
Armchair
Companion to
Dickens
Brian Murray

CONTINUUM • LONDON • NEW YORK

2009

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

Copyright © 2009 by Brian Murray

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Printed in the United States of America

9780826418821

The publisher has applied for CIP data.



Contents

Inimitable	1
Dickens on Children	45
John Forster on Dickens	46
Capsule: Sketches By Boz	47
Capsule: The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club	50
A Christian Writer	52
Capsule: Oliver Twist	56
Capsule: Nicholas Nickleby	60
Capsule: The Old Curiosity Shop	62
Dickens and Animals	64
Dickens on Vice and Crime	68
Capsule: Barnaby Rudge	69
Damn Yankees	71
Capsule: Martin Chuzzlewit	77
Christmas Stories	81

Capsule: Dombey and Son	88
The Magnitizer	92
A Conductor of Words	96
Capsule: David Copperfield	104
Dickens Down Under	107
Capsule: Bleak House	111
“London Man Dies in Mystery Fire”	113
Dickens on Education	115
Dickens on Sanitation	116
Capsule: Hard Times	117
John Ruskin on Charles Dickens	121
The Top of the Tree: Dickens vs. Thackeray	122
William Thackeray on Charles Dickens	127
Capsule: Little Dorrit	128
Capsule: A Tale of Two Cities	131
What Dickens Read	133
Dickens on the Artist	137
Dickens on the Couch	138
Dickens on Film	142
Capsule: Great Expectations	146
Dickens and Macready	150
Capsule: Our Mutual Friend	152
Capsule: The Mystery of Edwin Drood	159
Charles Dickens, “A Walk in a Workhouse”	162
Dean Arthur Stanley on Dickens	167
Sources and Credits	168



“How often one really thinks about any writer, even a writer one cares for, is a difficult thing to decide; but I should doubt whether anyone who has actually read Dickens can go a week without remembering him in one context or another. Whether you approve of or not, he is there, like the Nelson Column. At any moment some scene or character, which may come from some book you cannot even remember the name of, is liable to drop into your mind. Micawber’s letters! Winkle in the witness-box! Mrs. Gamp! Mrs. Wititterly and Sir Tumley Snuffin! Todger’s! Mrs. Leo Hunter! Squeers! Silas Wegg and the Decline and Fall-off of the Russian Empire! Miss Mills and the Desert of Sahara! Wopsle acting Hamlet! Mrs. Jellyby! Mantalini, Jerry Cruncher, Barkis, Pumblechook, Tracy Tupman, Skimpole, Joe Gargery, Pecksniff—and so it goes on and on. It is not so much a series of books, it is more like a world.”

— George Orwell,
“Charles Dickens,” 1939



CHARLES DICKENS



Inimitable

.....



fter more than a decade of literary fame, Charles Dickens started to think about writing an autobiography. It wasn't a chore he welcomed, but he was increasingly the subject of sometimes "wildly imaginative" stories appearing in the British and American press. In 1842, after reading one of these accounts, Dickens jokingly swore that he might "one of these days be induced to lay violent hands upon myself—in other words attempt my own life."

Dickens (1812-1870) was a phenomenon, and his story was unprecedented in many ways. After he achieved early success, his influence grew, and he became—in a very modern way—a celebrity, the most recognized writer of his day. Dickens' novels were international bestsellers; his characters too—Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller, *Oliver Twist*—became household names. Dickens was himself "wildly imaginative" and a widely respected public figure actively engaged with a wide range of social issues and debates.

Dickens was on permanent display for most of his life. He relished his success and the many benefits of fame. But he was also private and not proud of every aspect of his character or his life's story. So it's not surprising that Charles Dickens never did write *The Life of Charles Dickens*. He left the job and the title to John Forster, whose three-volume biography first appeared just two years after the great writer's death.

Forster dreaded the task. He knew Dickens too well, he believed, having been his closest friend for many years. In the end Forster was discreet, as Dickens assumed he would be. He was admiring too. But he wasn't worshipful, and the Dickens Forster presents is, in all essentials, the thoroughly examined Dickens biographers describe today. He is estimable and exasperating, bril-

liantly funny and often very angry: high-minded, petty, markedly generous, fiercely productive, and intensely self-absorbed.

In fact, Forster's biography stunned many readers and critics who were struck not only by the ferocity with which Dickens managed his career, but by the revelation that the hearty author of *The Pickwick Papers* and *A Christmas Carol* had been so often discontented and haunted by events from his boyhood years. Dickens' childhood, as Forster related, was a tale of innocence and experience, of light and dark—of being cast from a garden of security and indulgence into a world of struggle and neglect.

Dickens belonged by birth to what might be called the aspiring servant class. To be sure his mother, Elizabeth Barrow, had grown up secure and fairly well-schooled in a comfortable middle-class milieu, the daughter of a senior administrator in the pay office of the Royal Navy. But Dickens' grandparents, on his father's side, worked—as steward and housekeeper—for John Crewe, later Lord Crewe, a member of Parliament and an influential Whig. Dickens' grandfather died in 1785, the same year that John Dickens, the novelist's father, was born. But for many years Dickens' grandmother remained on Lord Crewe's household staff, attending diligently to her duties, and—as one Dickens biography put it—rearing her children “as genteel copies of the upstairs people.”

With Crewe's help, John Dickens became at nineteen a pay clerk in the navy Pay Office in London, where he met the Barrows, and showed every indication of moving duly up the ranks. After a two-year courtship, John and Elizabeth were married and moved first to Portsmouth, where, in 1810, their first child, Fanny, was born. Charles was next. Over the next thirteen years six more children followed, but two, a boy and a girl, died in infancy.

When Dickens was five, his family moved to Chatham, near Rochester, in Kent—a place he remembered fondly. For about four years the young Dickens family lived well in a roomy house,



Dickens

employing a nanny and a maid. John called himself a gentleman, hosted parties, and donated funds to local charities. He boosted his children's talents. Fanny, he noted, was musical, and Charles had a charming gift for singing comical songs. John, proud of the boy, stood him on tabletops and let him perform to the applause of neighbors and friends.

Charles was slight for his age and often sickly; "he was never a first-rate hand at marbles," Forster admits, "or peg-top, or prisoner's base." But he was clever—"a boy of capacity," in the words of William Giles, the Chatham schoolmaster who first took note of his precocious skills. By the time he was ten or eleven, Dickens had read most of the books in his father's library, including *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and—a particular favorite—*The Arabian Nights*. These and other popular titles "kept alive my fancy," Dickens writes in the autobiographical *David Copperfield*:

I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe. I had a greedy relish for a few volumes of voyages and travels—I forgot what, now—that were on those shelves; and for days and days I can remember to have gone about my region of our house, armed with the centre-piece out of an old set of boot-trees: the perfect realization of Captain Somebody, of the Royal Navy, in danger of being beset by savages.... When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed reading as if for life.

But John and Elizabeth Dickens, sociable and well-intentioned, could not make their household run. Elizabeth, at least in Dickens' characterization, was impulsive and flighty. John liked his drink. He was very good at borrowing money and very bad at paying it back. In 1822, when John Dickens was transferred back to London, he probably believed—wrongly, it turned out—that he was outrunning his creditors and all set for another fresh start.

For several decades Dickens did not discuss the complications of his childhood years. Even Forster was surprised to learn that, not long after he resettled his family in London, John Dickens was back in financial crisis and evading the law; that he was finally arrested and carted off to the Marshalsea, a debtor's jail. Before then, in an effort to stay afloat, his family had pawned books and furniture and Mrs. Dickens managed somehow to start a school,

posting a sign—"Mrs. Dickens's Establishment"—and sending Charles off with handbills to announce its debut. But "nobody ever came to the school," Dickens told Forster. "Nor do I recollect that anybody ever proposed to come, or that the least preparation was made to receive anybody."



The Flower-Girl

For Charles, however, more trauma loomed. One of his mother's relatives had found him work in a blacking factory next to the Thames, near Hungerford Stairs. Charles was hired to affix labels to jars of Warren's boot polish, sold throughout the British Isles. Business was good for Warren's, but its products, as Dickens told Forster, were made in a "crazy, tumble-down" warehouse where, as he worked, he could hear rats, "swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times."

Thus had the wheel of fortune turned. Through no fault of his own, the star pupil of his little local school—a boy who could conjugate Latin verbs and had already written a play, *Misnar, the Sultan of India*—was now stuck in a rat-filled warehouse, put to toil beside poor, unschooled boys with no expectations of their own. It was all so bewildering and unfair. Somehow, Charles's sister Fanny had been allowed to keep up her studies at the Royal Academy of Music. And his younger siblings had joined their parents in family quarters at the Marshalsea, an accepted practice at the time. But there was poor Charles, quite on his own, lodged in a rented room some distance away.

And so one pictures him walking to and from Warren's at dawn and dusk, passing among beggars, pickpockets, flower girls, and crossing-sweepers—the sort of weary urban strugglers one finds in Henry Mayhew's portrait of *London Labour London Poor* (1851). At Warren's, bustling about for long hours with his paste pots and scissors, Charles was teased by young workmates who found it quite droll to find this "young gentleman" dropped into their midst.

John Dickens was, as Forster revealed, the main model for Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield*, Dickens' most directly autobiographical novel. He was a man of stark moods and was often low. But imprisonment, he found, wasn't that bad. The pseudo-aristocratic manner he cultivated ("airy," "chatty," "a little pompous," as some acquaintances described it) set him apart from the other inmates and compensated for his threadbare state. He was popular at the Marshalsea as a source of diversion and avuncular advice. Mr. Dickens may have been housing his family behind a prison wall, but he was also free for the time from financial pressures, and every day he held center stage.

Charles also enjoyed his father's performances. Once, visiting the Marshalsea, he watched quietly as a long line of men entered his family's cramped room to sign a petition to the Queen composed, with typical floridness, by John Dickens himself. One "Captain Porter (who had washed himself, to do honour to so solemn an occasion)" read out the petition "in a loud, sonorous voice," as Dickens told Forster. "I remember a certain luscious roll he gave to such words as 'Majesty—gracious Majesty—your Gracious Majesty's unfortunate subjects—your Majesty's well-known munificence'—as if the words were something real in his mouth, and delicious to taste: my poor father meanwhile listening with a little of an author's vanity, and contemplating (not severely) the spikes on the opposite wall."

"Whatever was comical in this scene," Dickens told Forster, "and whatever was pathetic, I sincerely believe I perceived in my corner, whether I demonstrated or not, quite as well as I should perceive it now. I made out my own little character and story for every man who put his name to the sheet of paper." Their "different peculiarities of dress, of face, of gait, of manner, were written indelibly upon my memory. I would rather have seen it than the best play ever played."

A Turn of Events

And then, as if in a play, a small pension arrived and a modest inheritance, and suddenly John Dickens was out of the Marshalsea. Charles understandably assumed that he too would be released from the warehouse—but his mother had other plans. His small wage, she calculated, was still vital to the household fund. Charles, she insisted, must stick to his post. Dickens told Forster that he never quite forgave his parents and particularly his

mother for treating him not like a boy of capacity, but a little wage slave. From the start, he told Forster, they both seemed “quite satisfied” with his career in the blacking factory: “they could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge.”

Warren’s had moved to a new building, and now placed its young workers beside a street-level window where in a strong light their brisk industry could be admired by passers-by. And so young Charles Dickens, once cheered for his songs and comical stories, was now drawing attention as a harried drudge. Finally, his pride struck, John Dickens stopped his son’s laboring and put him in school.

It was not a very good school. The Wellington House Academy, despite certain pretensions, mainly prepared lower-middle-class boys for modest careers as clerks. Dickens mocked the place and its eccentric faculty in an 1851 essay, “Our School.” The Latin master was “a colourless doubled-up near-sighted man with a crutch, who was always cold, and always putting onions into his ears for deafness, and ... always applying a ball of pocket-handkerchief to some part of his face with a screwing action round and round.” And William Jones, the headmaster, was a vulgar bully: “The only branches of education with which he showed the least acquaintance, were, ruling and corporally punishing. He was always ruling ciphering-books with a bloated mahogany ruler, smiting the palms of offenders with the same diabolical instrument, or viciously drawing a pair of pantaloons tight with one of his large hands and caning the wearer with the other.”

Clearly the events of Dickens’ early years, so closely associated with feelings of abandonment and shame, left a lingering wound. Dickens himself told Forster that, even as an adult, he could not bear to go near the old Warren’s warehouse, for “a certain smell of the cement they put upon the blacking corks” always brought grim memories “of what I was once.” Passing the place “made me cry,” Dickens admitted, even “after my eldest child could speak.”

And yet, these events, he said, “have worked together to make me what I am.” Early on, he found energy in adversity. Early on, he lost confidence in his parents and, for better or worse, seized full control of his life through the relentless application of his will. Dickens may have inherited, from his father, both a love of language and a theatrical flair. But he was determined to succeed where his father had failed.

Certainly, at the Wellington House Academy, Dickens applied himself eagerly and left his mark. Other former students did not recall a morose or cringing boy, but one “full of animation and animal spirits” who “probably was connected with every mischievous prank at the school.” Charles formed a story-writing club and staged plays; he won prizes; he invented “a sort of lingo,” another schoolmate recalled, “which made us quite unintelligible to bystanders.” Another pictured Dickens

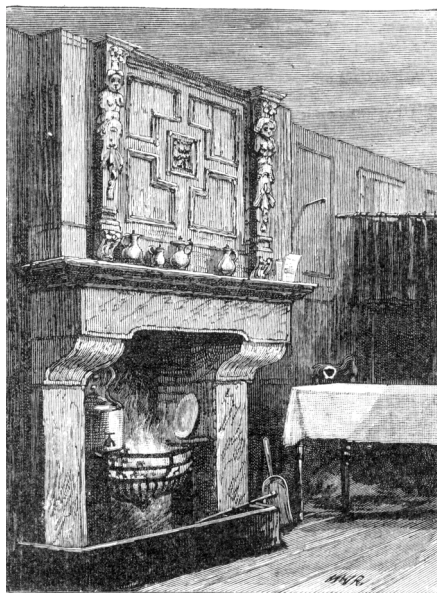
Leading us in Drummond Street in pretending to be poor boys and asking the passers-by for charity—especially old ladies, one of whom told us she ‘had no money for beggar boys.’ On these adventures, when the old ladies were quite staggered by the impudence of the demand, Dickens would explode with laughter and take to his heels.

Nothing in Dickens’ background—not least his family’s indigence—encouraged him to think of actually going to Cambridge, or any other university. And so, like most young men of his time and class, he set out at fifteen to face the world. He began as a clerk in the law office of Ellis and Blackmore in Holborn Court. Dickens found the work—bookkeeping, copying documents—dull beyond belief. But he liked the other office-lads and often joined them for an evening of mirth in theatres or pubs. London offered plenty of cabarets, music-halls, and conjuring shows where young men-about-town might disport themselves; there were also “private” theatres where, for a fee, an amateur actor could put on a costume and play out a couple of scenes as, say, Richard III. Dickens was already deeply drawn to London’s dramatic venues, and by the time he was twenty he went to theatres almost every night.

At the same time Dickens often visited the library at the British Museum, hoping a regimen of self-schooling might balance out somewhat his patchy education and lack of a university degree. He also taught himself shorthand, useful in several careers. Trained in a complex system of lines, squiggles, and dots, a skilled shorthand writer was like a human tape recorder, able to render a speech or debate with precise accuracy. But mastering the method was not easy, as Dickens stressed, “being about equal in difficulty to the mastery of six languages.” (David Copperfield, another shorthand adept, recalled the challenge of mastering the system this way: “the changes that were rung upon dots, which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such a position something else entirely different; the wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks



like flies' legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place, not only troubled my waking hours, but reappeared before me in my sleep.") Dickens, though, quickly learned the system, and was soon dazzling his colleagues and friends with the sharpness of his ear and the swiftness of his hand. Years later Dickens would still describe himself, perhaps only half-jokingly, as "the best shorthand writer in the world."



**"The Cock" Tavern
Fleet Street**

Tiring of the law, Dickens began covering the House of Commons as a shorthand reporter in 1831. He was employed by the *Mirror of Parliament*, a new weekly that, like *Hansard*, looked to provide an accurate record of governmental proceedings and debates. The *Mirror of Parliament* was owned by one of his mother's brothers, John Barrow, who—as it turned out—played a crucial role in boosting Dickens' young career. Charles enjoyed the work, and the pressure of deadlines, and all the camaraderie, intrigue and rivalry that came with a life in the press. He would always love newspapers in all of their various glories. Many years later, Dickens addressed a meeting of news vendors and praised them for dispensing all those "wonderful broadsheets" that

were, he believed, "indispensible to civilization and freedom."

In 1830 Dickens had met Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a London banker. Dickens courted her intently, incessantly, and in vain. Understandably, his biographers have made much of the episode, for this obsession with "the Pocket Venus" (as Maria's friends called her) had, as Dickens told Forster, "excluded every other idea from my mind for years, at a time of life when four years are equal to four times four." He was shattered when, in 1833, Maria, presumably pressured by her parents, told Dickens he should please stop coming round. "I have never loved," Dickens told her, "and I could never love any human creature breathing but yourself."

A Dynamic Age

The Beadnell episode, as Dickens told Forster, exposed the "desperate intensity of my nature." It also seems to have sparked

further his great drive to succeed. By 1834, Dickens was doing less transcribing and more actual reporting for the *Morning Chronicle*, a liberal daily with a long record of distinguished contributors, including, before Dickens, William Hazlitt and Samuel Coleridge. The young Dickens covered political events and elections in British cities and towns at a time of robust political debate: during the 1830s, Parliament passed the Reform Bill (which began a gradual expansion of voting rights) and debated the Factory Act (which regulated child labour), the Emancipation Act (which freed slaves in British colonies), and the Poor Law Amendment Act (which put in place a national board of commissioners to oversee the administration of poor relief). He quite enjoyed the thrill of racing back to London after covering some meeting or speech and “writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern, in a post-chaise and four, galloping through a wild country, and through the dead of the night, at the then surprising rate of fifteen miles an hour.” At one rally it rained so hard that, as Dickens fondly recalled, two friendly colleagues “held a pocket-handkerchief over my note-book, after the manner of a state canopy in an ecclesiastical procession.”

Queen Victoria’s long reign—from 1837 to 1901—was of course marked by far-reaching scientific and technological discoveries, and by the global amplification of British power; by the growth of cities, a rise in literacy, and a great adjustment of the social order as wealth and poverty grew, and more and more people aspired to and achieved their place in the expanding middle class. Thus the Victorian Dickens is recognizably modern too—an acute observer of the opportunities and complications that beset people living in dynamic economies during rapidly changing times.

But Dickens was an imaginative writer and a journalist, not a politician or a political theorist; and while he famously backed many progressive causes (including the expansion of education,

Temple Bar,
London

