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Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century

Charles Dickens

by Charles E. May

ENGLISH NOVELIST

The most popular novelist of his time, Dickens created a fictional world that reflected the social and technological changes of the Victorian era in which he lived. He created numerous immortal characters and is still one of the most widely read novelists in the world.

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT Literature

Early Life

Charles John Huffam Dickens was the second of eight children. His father, John Dickens, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, was always hard-pressed to support his family. Because his father's work made it necessary for him to travel, Dickens spent his youth in several different places, including London and Chatham. When he was only twelve years old, his father's financial difficulty made it necessary for the young Dickens to work in a shoeblacking warehouse while his father was placed in a debtor's prison at Marshalsea—an event that was to have a powerful influence on Dickens throughout his life. *Oliver Twist's* experience in the workhouse is one of the best-known results of what Dickens considered to be an act of desertion by his parents.

After his father was released from prison, Dickens was sent to school at an academy in London, where he was a good student. When he was fifteen, he worked as a solicitor's clerk in law offices and two years later became a shorthand reporter of parliamentary proceedings and a freelance reporter in the courts. In 1829, he fell in love with Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker, but broke with her in 1833. At the age of twenty-one, he began publishing his *Sketches by Boz* and joined the *Morning Chronicle* as a reporter. His first collection of *Sketches by Boz* appeared in 1836, the same year he began a series of sketches titled *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). Also in 1836, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a journalist. As *Pickwick Papers* became a striking popular success in serial publication, the Dickens phenomenon began, and Dickens was on his way to becoming the most powerful and widely read author in nineteenth century England.

Life's Work

With Dickens's sudden fame came offers of more literary work. He began editing a new monthly magazine for which he contracted to write another serial story, which he called *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) and that began to appear while *Pickwick Papers* was still running. Thus, Dickens started the breakneck speed of writing that was to characterize the energy of his work throughout his life. While *Oliver Twist* was still running in serial form, Dickens also began publishing *Nicholas Nickleby*, another great success, first in serial form (1838) and then as a book (1839). Immediately thereafter, he began the serialization of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) in a weekly publication, followed soon after by *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of '80* (1841).

Dickens paused from his writing between 1836 and 1841 to travel in the United States, the result of which was *American Notes* (1842) and, more important, the serialization of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), outraging many American readers with its caricature of life in the United States. During the Christmas season of 1843, Dickens achieved one of his most memorable successes with *A Christmas Carol*, which gave the world the character of Ebenezer Scrooge. The poor circulation of *Martin Chuzzlewit* was cause enough for Dickens to cease his writing once again for an extended visit to the Continent. However, the poor reception of *A Christmas Carol* was not enough to prevent Dickens from publishing two more Christmas stories—*The Chimes* (1844) and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845).

Returning from Italy in 1845, Dickens began editing a new daily newspaper, *The Daily News*, but resigned from that job after only three weeks. He began instead the serialization of *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), only to begin the serialization of *David Copperfield* (1849-1850) the following year. During this time, Dickens began working with amateur theatricals as an actor and a director, mostly to benefit literature and the arts. He then began editing the periodical *Household Words* and writing what many call his most ambitious work, *Bleak House*, in 1852, which ran for a year and a half.

In 1854, *Hard Times* was published serially in order to boost the failing circulation of *Household Words*, and soon thereafter, Dickens began serialization of *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857). At this time, Dickens purchased a home at Gad's Hill, on the road between London and Dover, but his home life was not to be that of country tranquillity. In 1858, he separated from his wife amid much bad publicity.

Also in 1858, Dickens began another major aspect of his professional life—a series of public readings from his own work. Although he published *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859, the public readings in London did not abate. In 1860, he began writing *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) to increase the circulation of a new weekly, *All the Year Round*. London readings continued through 1863, when he went to Paris for another series of readings there. Although he was experiencing poor health, Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) and performed public readings in London until 1868, when he made his last trip to the United States for a tour of readings that brought him much money but that taxed his already failing health.

When Dickens returned to England after several months in the United States, he took up readings again in London, Scotland, and Ireland, in addition to beginning his last work (which he did not live to finish), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). In 1870, on June 8, after working all day, Dickens suffered a stroke while at his Gad's Hill home and died the next day. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Significance

As any account of his life makes clear, what most characterizes Charles Dickens is the amount of work he produced and the fact that all of it was originally written for serial publication—a demanding way to publish. To keep up with the demand, Dickens was writing constantly. Although audiences followed Dickens's work as closely as they follow television soap operas today, identifying with his characters as if they were real people and eagerly awaiting each new installment, the fact that Dickens had to keep writing continuously to meet the demands of serialization has made many academic critics scorn his work as popular melodrama catering to the tastes of the masses.

The widespread popularity of Dickens, which continues unabated into the twenty-first century, cannot be accounted for so simply. In spite of the fact that Dickens cranked out novel after novel, as if he were a one-man literary factory, he impresses even skeptics as a masterful storyteller and a genius at characterization.

Many critics have tried to account for what might be called the mystery of Dickens: his amazing aptitude for visualizing scenes in concrete detail, his ability to control and develop highly elaborate plots, and most of all, his puzzling method of creating characters that, even as they are obviously caricatures, seem somehow more real in their fictionality than most realistic characters are. Simply to name such characters as Mr. Pickwick, Scrooge, Fagin, and Mr. Micawber is to conjure up images that are destined to remain memorable.

The fact that Dickens's novels have been so easily adapted to film has added to the almost hallucinatory way with which his works are imprinted on the mind of modern readers and viewers. Such scenes as Oliver in the workhouse asking for more gruel, Sydney Carton on the scaffold in *A Tale of Two Cities*, saying what a far, far better thing he does, and Miss Havisham in her decayed wedding dress in *Great Expectations* have become part of the mind and memory of millions of Dickens's admirers.

Dickens drew his inspiration primarily from three sources. First, much of his writing is autobiographical. One can see the deserted, poverty-stricken child in *Oliver Twist*, the aspiring young writer in *David Copperfield*, and the misguided young man in *Pip*. Second, Dickens wrote about the many social and technological elements of Victorian society. *Bleak House* is a compendium of Dickens's knowledge about the complexities of the law courts, just as *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a satiric overview of Victorian (and American) social absurdities.

In such works as *Hard Times*, Dickens focused on the deficiencies of utilitarian philosophy of the period, and in *Little Dorrit*, he turned his attention to the bureaucracy of the business world. Finally, Dickens's fiction developed out of the same source from which all fiction ultimately springs, that is, the many conventions of fiction itself. In spite of the fact that Dickens was not highly educated, he was well-read, especially in the wellspring works of storytelling and character-making such as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615), as well as the masterworks of the novel's beginning in the eighteenth century, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), and Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748). Thus, in spite of the fact that Dickens's characters seem so very real when the reader remembers them, they seem real precisely because they are so artificial; that is, they are pure fictional creations who can exist only in Dickens's imaginative world.

The number of Dickens's admirers seems to grow each year. Such adaptations of Dickens's work as the highly popular musical version of *Oliver Twist*, the ambitious (day-long) and masterful Royal Shakespeare Company's stage presentation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the yearly tradition of countless presentations of *A Christmas Carol* introduce new readers to Dickens's works over and over again. There is little doubt that he will continue to be the most popular and influential spokesman of Victorian England, for, in the minds of the majority, Victorian England is Dickens's England.

Further Reading

- 1 Ackroyd, Peter. *The Life and Times of Charles Dickens*. Irvington, N.Y.: Hydra, 2003. Ackroyd describes the public and private lives of Dickens in this illustrated biography. Despite the novelist's public fame and wealth, the private man was anxious about money and ashamed of his extramarital relationship. The British Broadcasting Company published this book in 2002 under the title *Dickens: Public Life and Private Passion*.
- 2 Ayers, Brenda. *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998. The author argues that Dickens's novels actually subvert Victorian ideology with respect to their portrayal of women.
- 3 Coolidge, Archibald C., Jr. *Charles Dickens as Serial Novelist*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967. A helpful study of a very important aspect of Dickens's work: The fact that his writing first appeared in serialization had a great influence on the nature of his narrative.
- 4 Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-1874. Rev. ed. 1876. The first authoritative biography, in three volumes (two in the revised edition), written by a friend and literary adviser of Dickens, and valuable for the many factual details and anecdotes it includes.
- 5 House, Humphrey. *The Dickens World*. London: Oxford University Press, 1941. An important book that helped to initiate the revival of the study of Dickens as a serious novelist; focuses on Victorian social issues in Dickens's work.
- 6 Johnson, Edgar. *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*. 2 vols. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952. Rev. ed. New York: Viking Press, 1977. The definitive biography; also contains very good criticism of Dickens's work.
- 7 Kaplan, Fred. *Dickens: A Biography*. New York: William Morrow, Hodder & Stoughton, 1988. Acclaimed biography of Dickens, whose life in many ways mirrored those of his characters. Kaplan uses unpublished and abandoned sources to create a three-dimensional portrait of Dickens's life, including his passions, unhappy marriage, and complicated family life.
- 8 Leavis, F. R., and Q. D. Leavis. *Dickens the Novelist*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1970. Focuses on the novels from *Dombey and Son* through *Great Expectations*; excellent criticism by two highly respected British critics.
- 9 Marcus, Steven. *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*. New York: Basic Books, 1965. A study of Dickens's early work, focusing on Victorian cultural life; a stimulating account by a well-known critic of Victorian literature and life.
- 10 Nelson, Harland S. *Charles Dickens*. Boston: Twayne, 1981. Not the usual introductory survey, this study focuses on the way Dickens wrote and published and how the basic elements of his novels engage the reader.
- 11 Smiley, Jane. *Charles Dickens*. New York: Viking Press, 2002. Smiley, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, describes Dickens as the "first true celebrity in the modern sense," and portrays him as he was known to his contemporaries. Smiley examines how Dickens used incidents from his life in his fiction and how he carefully crafted a public image.
- 12 Wilson, Angus. *The World of Charles Dickens*. New York: Viking Press, 1970. Perhaps the best single-volume study of Dickens's life as well as his work as a popular novelist.

Related Articles in *Great Events from History: The Nineteenth Century*

1843: Carlyle Publishes *Past and Present*; March, 1852-September, 1853: Dickens Publishes *Bleak House*; 1884: New Guilds Promote the Arts and Crafts Movement.

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- APA Style May, Charles E. (2007). Charles Dickens. In J. Powell (Ed.), *Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century*. Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from <https://online.salempress.com>
- CHICAGO Style May, Charles E. "Charles Dickens." *Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century*. Hackensack: Salem, 2007. Accessed February 07, 2018. <https://online.salempress.com>.

The beginning of the nineteenth century was remarkable for Great Britain for its union with Ireland. In Ireland, some of the Irish united under the and began to demand independence, being affected by the French Revolution. They formed the organization known as the United Irishmen. They quickly took the lead of the whole national movement, and attempted to initiate a rebellion in 1796, with the help of the French troops which were ready to land in Ireland. The landing failed, and the English government began to eliminate its enemies. In 1798 it seized a number of the Irish leaders, and placed the whole Ireland under the military law. All the Irish uprising were suppressed, and finally the rebellion and an attempt of the French invasion led to the Act of Union with Ireland of 1801. The 19th (nineteenth) century began on January 1, 1801 (MDCCCI), and ended on December 31, 1900 (MCM). The 19th century was the ninth century of the 2nd millennium. The 19th century saw large amounts of social change; slavery was abolished, and the First and Second Industrial Revolutions (which also overlap with the 18th and 20th centuries, respectively) led to massive urbanization and much higher levels of productivity, profit and prosperity. The Islamic gunpowder empires were formally dissolved and... Other articles where History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century is discussed: George Peabody Gooch: In the classic History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century (1913), he dissociated himself from the widely held view that history is a mere science. In the classic History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century (1913), he dissociated himself from the widely held view that history is a mere science. In the nineteenth century, three types of flow existed within international economic exchanges. They were: Trade flow. Labour flow. Capital flow. Let's understand the nineteenth-century global world by looking all these flows simultaneously. Formation of a World Economy. However, live animals took up a lot of space and many fell ill during the journey rendering their meat inedible. This invariably led to the increase of meat prices in Britain. Eventually, technology stepped in which led to the invention of refrigerated ships. During the late nineteenth century, many Europeans came to Africa to establish plantations and mines. However, there were very few Africans willing to work for a wage. They were happy rearing cattle and farming for their own food.