

# The Dickensian

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Professor John Bowen, the New President of the Dickens Fellowship

## From the New President

It is an enormous honour and pleasure to be invited to be President of the Dickens Fellowship. The Fellowship is a unique organisation that has the great creative achievement of Dickens as its beating heart, and which is flourishing well into its second century. Conversations, lectures and conferences about Dickens always seem exceptionally good-humoured, as if something of his own generosity and love of humanity infected them. Meeting together this summer at Carrara connected us across the many countries and continents from which members of the Fellowship come, and across the centuries to Dickens's own visit to that beautiful north Italian city.

It is difficult, looking back on the many illustrious names of my predecessors, not to feel awed by their achievements and distinction. But I feel even more awed by the quietly effective hard work of so many members of the Fellowship around the world who give their time and energy to ensuring that our Branches, conferences, organisation and journal continue to thrive. I am particularly grateful to my predecessor Tony Williams for innumerable acts of kindness and help, as well of course for his many years of exemplary service to the Fellowship.

I am fortunate to live and work in the historic city of York which Dickens visited several times. Whenever I catch a train, I think of the many times he must have passed through York *en route* to Newcastle or Scotland or back south to London. One of these journeys – an eighteen-hour marathon from London to Aberdeen – was recalled by his reading manager George Dolby in his memoirs, *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him*. Having polished off a meal consisting of ‘the artful sandwich’ (egg and anchovy paste), salmon mayonnaise, salad, pressed beef, cold fowls, cold tongue, a cherry tart, Roquefort cheese and coffee, washed down with his favourite gin punch, Dickens, who loved to dance, then danced a hornpipe on the train, accompanied by Dolby and W. H. Wills on a ‘whistling accompaniment’. With his characteristic sense of fun and lack of self-importance, Dickens turned a long and tedious journey into a great celebratory occasion, punctuated by, as Dolby tells us, ‘explosive laughter at the absurdity of the situation and the pretended indignation of the dancer at the indifference of the music’. Anything can be transformed by Dickens; everything be made to give pleasure.

Dickens, thankfully, never seemed to take presidents (or, for that matter, professors) too seriously. Indeed, he usually seemed to find them very funny. In the *Mudfog Papers*, for example, we encounter Professor Snore, the President of the Zoology and Botany section of the Mudfog Association, who is very interested in communicating

with fleas. He is not the only ridiculous professor and president in that book: there are also Professors Muff and Nogo, Wheezy, Snore, Doze, Queerspeck, Rumun and Pumpkinskull. I trust you will forgive me if I turn out to be as wooden-headed, dozy or snore-inducing as they, or if my skull turns out to be a bit of a pumpkin.

One of the great joys of writing and teaching about Dickens is meeting with fellow-enthusiasts to discuss an author whose creativity and imagination seem inexhaustible. I do hope that in my term as President I will have the opportunity to meet as many of you as possible, to share our passion for this endlessly surprising and inventive novelist, editor, performer, man of letters, practical philanthropist, and, last but not least, dancer of the locomotive hornpipe.

JOHN BOWEN

#### Notes on Contributors

EMILY BELL completed her PhD on 'Changing Representations of Charles Dickens, 1857-1939' at the University of York in 2017, and is editing an essay collection on *Dickens After Dickens* for the White Rose University Press.

JOHN BOWEN is Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of York and current President of the Dickens Fellowship. He is currently editing *Bleak House* for Norton and writing *Reading Dickens* for CUP.

LINDA CARROLL was a Primary Headteacher in Kent, with a particular interest in children's literature and storytelling.

JEREMY CLARKE is Education Officer at the Guildhall Museum, Rochester, and author of *The Charles Dickens Miscellany* (2014).

JOANNE EYSELL is the author of *A Medical Companion to Dickens's Fiction*. She lives in Germany, where she is a free-lance medical translator.

PAUL GRAHAM is Honorary General Secretary of the Dickens Fellowship.

WILLIAM F. LONG is Emeritus Professor in Biochemistry at the University of Aberdeen, and has published many articles on Dickens.

LILLIAN NAYDER is Professor of English and Chair of the Humanities Division at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and author of *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth*. She is currently writing *Charles Dickens: A Life with Brothers*.

VALERIE PURTON is Emerita Professor of Victorian Literature at Anglia University, Editor of the *Tennyson Research Bulletin* and author of *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition* (2012)

DAVID RAW is a retired solicitor, member of the North East Branch of the Dickens Fellowship and currently a Guest Member of Staff in the School of Law at Newcastle University.

PAUL SCHLICKE is retired from the English Department at the University of Aberdeen. His most recent monograph is *Simply Dickens* (2016). His Clarendon edition of *Sketches by Boz* is in production.

CHRISTINE SKELTON is Emeritus Professor of Gender and Education at the University of Birmingham. She is currently researching and writing a biography of Georgina Hogarth.

MICHAEL SLATER MBE is the author of *Charles Dickens* (2009) and *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal* (2012). His *Dickens and Women* and *Dickens on America and the Americans* were reissued this summer (Edward Everett Root Publishers).

# The Dickens Family, the Boz Club and the Fellowship

EMILY BELL

DICKENS'S FAMOUS STIPULATION in his will that his friends, 'on no account [...] make me the subject of any monument, memorial or testimonial whatsoever' (Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 859) has made commemorating Dickens difficult: 'monument, memorial or testimonial' can be read to cover statues, biographies and memoirs, even anecdotes. As such, it is unsurprising that this request has been roundly ignored, especially in the twenty-first century: two hundred and two years after his birth, a statue was erected in Portsmouth as his birthplace, and within little over a month of his death in 1870 his friends – and others – were publishing accounts of his life.<sup>1</sup> Over the decades that followed, many of Dickens's family members would follow suit. Complementing these memoirs and anecdotes, Dickens's family and friends also sought to honour the author's convivial legacy by going back to the word's etymological root in 'living together' and 'feasting together': Henry Dickens was one of the founding members of the Boz Club, the aim of which was to meet once a year on Dickens's birthday and remember him through a meal, speeches and debates about the author's legacy. The Club, largely made up of Dickens's surviving friends and collaborators, predates the much more influential and lasting Dickens Fellowship. The former boasted over two hundred subscriptions at its peak, but could not have the global reach of the Fellowship. The latter, founded shortly after, took up the annual Dickens dinners and the convivial remembrances of Dickens in the 1920s after the Boz Club folded during the First World War. The early years, in which the two ran concurrently, saw some friction as Henry Dickens resented not being involved in the establishment of the Fellowship and initially resisted joining. For him, remembering Dickens was a duty that should be led by him as Dickens's last surviving son.

Records of the early years of the Boz Club and the Dickens Fellowship, and the letters of the wider Dickens family, are often frustratingly difficult to access first-hand, scattered around archives worldwide – a testament to the love of Dickens that helped Fellowship Branches spring up across the world, perhaps. I have also consulted Arthur A. Adrian's *Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle* (1957) and Lillian Nayder's *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (2011), which have shed light on the Dickens women and shown their role in shaping the author's image, and Michael Slater's *The Great Charles Dickens Scandal*

(2012) with its wide-ranging study of Dickens's posthumous reputation. I have used the Charles Dickens Museum's extensive archive, as well as the Fitzgerald Collection in the Medway Archive, Rochester, and the Gimbel-Dickens Collection held by the Beinecke Library at Yale University, but the collections of the *Boz Club Papers* held in the archives, which include membership lists, committee members' names and an account of all speeches and events of the Club, particularly, are incomplete. Some of the letters and newspaper clippings I have referenced are by necessity referenced secondarily, while conversely others are drawn directly from scrapbooks and minute books held in those archives. The Fellowship's own history is recorded in detail in the pages of *The Dickensian*, with retrospectives written by prominent members beginning with J. W. T. Ley's 'The Dickens Fellowship, 1902-1923. A Retrospect' published in 1923.<sup>2</sup> The Dickens collectors' market on eBay has also yielded a letter concerning the Dickens Fellowship from Henry Dickens, which I possess in photograph form – the original is now in private, unknown hands. Perhaps archival issues have led to the relative paucity of work on the Boz Club: *The Dickens Industry: Critical Perspectives 1836-2005* mentions the Club briefly, in telling the story of Fitzgerald (47), but does not consider it further in considering Dickens's afterlife, and there is rarely more than a cursory mention elsewhere.

This essay explores the early efforts to mould Dickens's reputation, and it exposes shifting attitudes to Dickens's conviviality and the problematic role of families in shaping biography. *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870* edited by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter (1880), Georgina Hogarth's early attempt to protect Dickens's image, contrasts with Katey Dickens's ambiguously revealing role in *Dickens and Daughter* (1939). The Boz Club and Dickens Fellowship moved towards a very differently convivial appreciation of Dickens in a context removed from family control. The differences between the various family representations and commemorations reveal complex motivations in how best to remember Dickens – as an author, as a father, as a man, or perhaps even as Boz, his early pen name. Things changed when Dickens's immediate family was gone and the author's life was being remembered by the members of the Dickens Fellowship, as a society founded with the aim of 'knit[ting] together in a common bond of friendship lovers of the great master of humour and pathos, Charles Dickens' ('History of the Fellowship').

To understand the desire of the family to control Dickens's posthumous image, it is necessary to examine the relationship between John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74) and the subsequent family writings. Forster's biography became –



and, in many ways, still is – the standard by which to compare all subsequent Dickens biographies. It was the first, for example, to reveal the author's difficult childhood and his time working in Warren's Blacking Factory, filling a gap in the biographical archive: until Forster's *Life*, even Dickens's children seemed to have been ignorant of their father's childhood. The picture of Dickens painted by Forster is one of overcoming that early adversity, of hard work and of almost unparalleled success. The problem that the separation from his wife caused for his public image is alluded to in a single paragraph. Forster's motivations, as Richard Salmon has argued, were tied to the importance of the literary profession, and Dickens's literary – and financial – success: 'From the perspective of the early 1870s, Dickens's professional career marks a triumphant realization of the note of unfulfilled promise with which Forster had ended his biography of Goldsmith over twenty years earlier.' (Salmon 122)

Oliver Goldsmith, among other influential eighteenth-century writers, had ended his life destitute, so it was important for Forster that Dickens did not, and this is reinforced throughout the biography with circulation figures and markers of Dickens's success.<sup>3</sup> Goldsmith's financial troubles and the morality tale that Forster weaves in his biography, ending with a condemnation of the social conditions that allowed authors like Goldsmith to die penniless, were a strong argument for the recognition of a literary profession. Dickens as arguably the first global author-celebrity seems to be treated as the culmination of this debate, and Forster's meticulous accounts of Dickens's earnings and income contrast starkly with Goldsmith's poverty. Forster's final word on the subject is Dickens's will, appended at the end of the biography, showing exactly what he had left to his family.

Forster had been the family-sanctioned biographer of Dickens (Adrian 183). He was also joint executor of Dickens's will with Georgina, so it would seem fair to assume that their interests largely aligned: it is particularly interesting to note that while Forster was left all of Dickens's manuscripts in the will, Georgina was left all of his papers 'whatsoever and wheresoever' (Forster 857). For Forster to use Dickens's letters and possibly even the autobiographical fragment that describes the author's early traumatic experience at Warren's Blacking would, presumably, have necessitated Georgina's input. Forster's death in 1876, then, was a turning point. After this, in spite of supporting Forster's biography during his life, Georgina and Dickens's daughter Mamie began to collect and edit letters for their own volumes of *Letters*, which would be published 1880-1882.

One major purpose behind the *Letters'* publication was to contrast with the literary, public life presented by Forster in creating a more personal, family-oriented Dickens who was interested in

'trivial' household matters as well as literary success. The first sign that the *Letters* were trying to do something different came in the Preface, in which Georgina and Mamie describe the work as a 'supplement' to Forster's biography (*Letters* vii). The wording of the Preface was quite restrained compared to Georgina's words in her letters; she wrote that Forster's *Life* 'fails entirely in giving a picture of my dear Brother-in-law; at any rate, it gives only one view of him' (qtd. in Adrian 215). The word 'supplement' may seem innocuous enough, but as well as its connection with literary periodicals as an extension or completion, it also has connotations of deficiency and inadequacy – at the very least, to need to 'complete' Forster's *Life* suggests that it is incomplete.

The *Letters* are problematic in their own way, with radical selectivity, omissions and censorship, but they were received by many reviewers exactly as intended.<sup>4</sup> The main criticisms of Forster's biography centred on his reliance on his own relationship with Dickens, and his own letters, as mentioned in the Preface. The *Letters* rectified this. K. J. Fielding suggested that their publication 'had much less effect' than John Forster's biography (98) and depicted Dickens merely as 'a charming eccentric who passed most of his time at the seaside with his family at Broadstairs and Boulogne, or in getting up private theatricals' (qtd. in Slater 42), while Duane DeVries argued that it 'corroborated what critics of *Forster* asserted – namely, that Dickens had a far more extensive group of close friends and acquaintances than Forster acknowledged' (74), concluding that 'One thus gets a more rounded picture of Dickens than one finds in *Forster*' (76). These views, while conflicting on the success and value of the volumes, both demonstrate that the *Letters* had effectively changed the focus from Dickens's public career, as in Forster, to Dickens's relationship with his family and friends. Forster had been deliberately reticent about Dickens's home life, and the *Letters* also avoided mention of Dickens's separation from his wife, but through them we see Dickens as a warm and generous correspondent, with a good sense of humour and deeply invested in his family. From the nicknames he had for them – and for himself – to his letters from America inquiring after his children, the Dickens presented was rooted in humour and kindness.

Although references to Dickens's novels are present in the *Letters*, they are secondary to painting a picture of a domestic Dickens, primarily focused on family life. Dickens's daughter Mamie continued this picture in her child's life of Dickens, aimed at 'making any boys and girls love and venerate the Man – before they can know and love and venerate the Author' (*Charles Dickens by His Eldest Daughter*, 3); she does not tackle the perplexing question of why readers would want to venerate Dickens as a man without knowing him as an author. She also wrote *My Father As*



*I Recall Him*, a devotional piece of life writing that once again centres on Dickens at home. The Dickens that Mamie promoted was a domestic figure, a father first and writer second; she tells us that

No man was so inclined naturally to derive his happiness from home affairs. He was full of the kind of interest in a house which is commonly confined to women [...] (12)

It was particularly important to emphasise Dickens's domestic role because of his accusations against his wife Catherine: Georgina and Mamie preemptively defended Dickens against charges of cruelty to her in their separation and in keeping her children from her, that would come to a head in the twentieth century in light of revelations about Dickens's relationship with Ellen Ternan, by highlighting his loving nature as a father, and his interest in the life of the house. Dickens's sons, Charley, Alfred and Henry, on the other hand, used anecdotes about Dickens in lectures on his novels, gave public readings as their father had done late in his career, and published new editions of his works. Charley, in continuing as editor of Dickens's periodical *All The Year Round*, saw himself as continuing Dickens's literary legacy and this focus contrasted with the domestic emphasis of the Dickens women.

By 1900, however, Charley and Mamie Dickens had died, and Georgina was in her seventies, old enough for Henry to keep from her the newspaper accounts of a man in Australia claiming to be her illegitimate son by Dickens.<sup>5</sup> Edward (affectionately nicknamed 'Plorn') and Alfred Dickens, encouraged to emigrate to Australia in the 1860s, lived until 1902 and 1912 respectively, but Edward remained in Australia while Alfred toured Europe and America in the early twentieth century to lecture on his father. Henry and Katey Dickens, then, are the key figures in the twentieth century. Katey died in 1929 while Henry would live on until 1933, the last of Dickens's children to die. He was also one of the founding members of the Boz Club in 1900. It was primarily founded by Percy Fitzgerald, one of Dickens's collaborators, at the Athenaeum Club in London. Fitzgerald took great pride in having founded the Club: the penultimate chapter of his two-volume *Life of Charles Dickens* is titled 'The Boz Club', and in it he boasts of 'carr[ying] the scheme out without taking counsel with anyone' (306). The chapter, dedicated to the Boz Club's achievements, ends with Fitzgerald asserting his role in the Fellowship, too, as 'its first President, while the great writer's son is the second' (309). The biography was dedicated to fellow Boz Club member and former Dickens illustrator Marcus Stone, and described the Club in personal, intimate terms:

You and I were of the old Gadshill times, and heard the chimes at midnight in its cosy chambers. Did not these ring back to us on that night in the early time of the Boz Club, at its first meeting, when each stood up and rehearsed his recollections? – A strangely interesting meeting it was: it seemed to bring back the spirit of the amiable Boz himself. (v)

This quotation draws on the connection of Shakespeare's Falstaff to Gad's Hill that Dickens himself appreciated (it being the site of Falstaff's robbery in *Henry IV Part 1*): in *Henry IV Part 2* Falstaff reminisces with Justice Shallow that, 'We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow' (III.ii.211). The phrase, too, has an echo of the bells that Scrooge hears in *A Christmas Carol*, transporting him to the past, present and future, and both connotations emphasise that the Club's success is in its personal connection to Dickens: only those who had visited Gad's Hill could recognise the spirit of Boz and have the sense of shared camaraderie invoked by Shakespeare's words. Ironically, Fitzgerald had already left the committee by this time, beginning the Club as President in 1900, declining to serve as Secretary of the Club in 1903 and not even attending the dinner in 1904.

Aspects of Dickens's early reputation are clearly rooted in the efforts of these two societies, who not only met for their own communal acts of remembrance but also engaged in public events and literary debates about Dickens. In a 1919 review of *The Secret of Dickens* by W. Walter Crotch (a founding member of the Dickens Fellowship) for the *TLS*, Virginia Woolf commented, 'Perhaps no one has suffered more than Dickens from the enthusiasm of his admirers, by which he has been made to appear not so much a great writer as an intolerable institution' (163). This act of institutionalising Dickens started as an act of commemoration. 'Boz' was the name adopted by Dickens in his early career and one he continued to use with friends long after he ceased to publish under that name. The Boz Club, then, was essentially a collection of Dickens's remaining friends, family and collaborators. The connections with the name 'Boz' are quite different from 'Dickens', invoking the early narrative persona of *Sketches by Boz* or *The Pickwick Papers*, and the emphasis on satirical humour in the former, and homosocial bonding in the latter (and, too, as an affectionate name in Dickens's letters). Robert L. Patten in *Charles Dickens and Boz: The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author* discusses in detail the associations and problems of 'Boz' for Dickens, chosen 'in order to keep Charles Dickens separate from his authorial personification – separate and under control' but taking on his own identity that contemporary readers in the 1830s read as ever a bachelor, and a vulgar one at

that (44). Forster describes these years in his *Life* as those before Dickens had his higher purpose in social reform (88). 'Boz', then, was seen as lacking in the kind of literary social conscience that would characterise Dickens's later novels – and, certainly, would become the focal point of Dickens's reputation following Forster's biography.

The Boz Club, while selective in its membership, was widely publicised: their literary pilgrimage to Kent in 1901 was documented in major newspapers including *The Daily News* and *The Daily Telegraph*, with the *Daily Mail* present to take photographs, establishing these men (women were not allowed to join, although Dickens's daughter Katey and sister-in-law Georgina were made honorary members in 1907) as the authorities on Dickens. Another outing was proposed in 1902 by Sir Francis Burnard, editor of *Punch*. Slater's *Great Charles Dickens Scandal* tells us that Burnard had found evidence that Dickens had spent time in Condette, near Boulogne (142-43). Burnard suggested the outing there in a column, which was then enthusiastically supported by Fitzgerald in the *Boz Club Papers*, but it was quashed – perhaps by Henry, aware of Dickens's connection to Condette through Ellen Ternan.<sup>6</sup>



'Some Eminent Members of the Boz Club': from 'In the footsteps of Charles Dickens', *Daily Mail*, 11 June 1901. From The Frederick Kitton Scrapbooks, Vol. 4, p. 40. Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum.

The Boz Club made remembering Dickens an activity primarily rooted in homosocial bonding and shared memories rather than values. Its existence demonstrates a resistance to the very domestic Dickens shown by his daughters and sister-in-law, and the publicly-minded Dickens shown by Forster; instead, the emphasis on male relationships, convivial dinners and trips could be straight out of *The Pickwick Papers*. However, as the ranks

of surviving Victorians thinned and the records of the meetings began to contain lists of those who passed away since the last meeting, the Boz Club began to change and a conflict arose between those who wanted to remember the 'Boz' they knew, and those who wanted to debate Dickens's legacy. Following the annual meal, there would be an after-dinner debate relating to Dickens which concluded with a statement from Henry, who often included personal anecdotes about his father. His best novel was discussed, for example, though 'It was generally understood that "Pickwick" and "David Copperfield" were not to be included in the list, as they would limit the scope of the Discussion' (*Boz Club Papers* 1904). Henry would have the final word on the topic as Dickens's son, legitimising the Boz Club meeting in his role as family representative. Increasingly, however, members disliked the critical aspect of the proceedings. In 1906, following a discussion of Dickens's illustrators, Marcus Stone, himself one of them, responded as follows:

I think we talk too analytically about the genius of the illustrious "Boz." Surely this Club is a place where meet genially and lovingly to recall him to our memory. (Hear, hear.) This is not a place and not an occasion when we wish to make demonstrations about our great master. It is our own little gathering of worship, an expression of affection and reverence. (Hear, hear.) At times I think there have been imported into these meetings a little too much of the grave and ponderous element instead of the genial and living one, and feeling, as all his old friends do, and as I think all the whole world does, a specially convinced regard for him, I think we ought to limit ourselves more to that. (Hear, hear.) (*Boz Club Papers* 1906)

Once again, there is an appeal to the 'living spirit' of Boz, whatever that may be. The Chairman that evening, a Lord Robertson (1845-1909), seems to have been offended by the reiteration of the importance of the intimacy of the Club's members with Dickens, remarking in closing that

I am afraid that this Club rightly understood is so esoteric and intimate and restricted a body that I am a mere outsider. I gather from your remarks that anyone who speaks of Charles Dickens from the point of view of one who has no relation to him at all except that of an admiring reader, is rather out of place. (*Boz Club Papers* 1906)

Although this was met with 'No, no', it makes clear that to remember Dickens for many of the Boz Club members was to put him above all criticism – to worship him – and focus on the

convivial, shared remembrance of its key members. The Dickens they chose to remember was expressed through personal anecdote, and was therefore not accessible to anyone who did not know the man – in spite of claims, like Stone's above, that they speak for the whole world. This air of elite exclusivity was reiterated by illustrator Henry Furniss, who spoke of the Boz Club as

the House of Lords as compared with the House of Commons of the Dickens Fellowship, which brought forth a remonstrance from the President, Henry F. Dickens, who said that the Boz Club, of which he was also a member, could afford to exist without boasting of a superiority over the Fellowship! (Dexter 26)

For Henry, the Boz Club meant remembering Dickens in a very specific way: as a social being, rather than a family man, and perhaps specifically remembering him in a way that opposed the feminised domestic figure shown by Georgina and Mamie. Although Henry was dismissive of the above comparison, it is clear that the Boz Club established itself as an élite group in possession of the greatest knowledge of Dickens the man.

This is in contrast to the Dickens Fellowship, founded in 1902 with the very deliberate choice of being a 'Fellowship' rather than a 'society', with meetings, conferences and fundraising events. Their fellowship is with Dickens and his works, and the name shows the kind of 'personal' relationship its members felt with the author in contrast to the intimacy of the Boz Club: the word has connotations of spiritual connection (*OED Online*). In 1905 the Dickens Fellowship launched *The Dickensian: A Magazine for Dickens Lovers and Monthly Record of the Dickens Fellowship*. The magazine became a forum for the kind of discussion that the Boz Club had begun to balk at. However, the Fellowship did not originally have the support of the Dickens family. Henry, offended at not being invited to be a Vice-President of the Fellowship before it began advertising itself, resisted joining, and several members of the Boz Club, including Luke Fildes, when approached, declared themselves too busy to take it on.

Letters in the Dickens Museum archive show Henry was unhappy that he had not been approached before the rules of the club were drawn up (letter to Frederic G. Kitton, 6 January 1903) and in them he claims that no one in the family had been approached. Henry saw the Fellowship as an advertisement for the revived *Household Words* journal and was quite insistent that he 'did not care to be a party to it.' In a letter for sale on eBay in March 2015 from Henry to B. W. Matz, one of the Fellowship's founders, Henry writes: 'Had there been any real desire to have my name added to the list of the Club I thought fondly that some

communication would have been sent to me as the only surviving son of Charles Dickens and the representative of the family in this country.' With Georgina Hogarth still alive, as well as an older sister and a surviving brother, it is striking that Henry saw himself unequivocally as the representative of the family. In this role, Henry had thrown his support behind the Boz Club rather than the Fellowship. However, the Dickens Fellowship did not necessarily expect its members to have known Dickens, and it also included women, moving away from the exclusivity of the Boz Club. Henry initially resisted, but other members of his family did not: Georgina and Katey were made honorary Vice-Presidents, and Katey would go on to serve as President for three consecutive years. Georgina became a kind of matriarch of the society, as the one with the longest memory of Dickens. Henry did resolve these differences with the Fellowship and take up the honorary position of Life President (also awarded to Katey *after* her three years of presidency), but his resistance and his claim to be the family representative show an underlying tension not only between Henry on the one side and Georgina and Katey on the other, but between the family and the Dickens-loving public.

While there were early tensions between the Boz Club and the Dickens Fellowship, by the end of the First World War only the Fellowship remained. Its focus on those who had known Dickens gave the Boz Club a short life: by 1918, few of its founding members were alive. In the 1920s and 30s, the project to protect Dickens's image became a more serious one for the Fellowship in the face of revelations about his affair with the teenage actress Ellen Ternan. By this time, Dickens's immediate family was dwindling; by 1933, none of his children would still be alive. What it meant to commemorate Dickens changed. Although Dickens's novels were not above discussion at the Fellowship's events or in *The Dickensian*, his novels and life, first recounted by Forster, became intertwined in the act of remembrance, and several Dickensian scholars sought to protect the author's own reputation as part of their reverence for his work. Although Dickens's children had all died, the Storey Papers held by the Dickens Museum contain several letters from Marie Dickens, Henry Dickens's widow, showing the continued commitment of both the extended Dickens family and also the Fellowship's leading members in maintaining Dickens's reputation. Marie wrote to J. W. T. Ley (who published a definitive annotated edition of Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* in 1928 and acted as Hon. General Secretary of the Dickens Fellowship in its early years, as well as contributing regularly to *The Dickensian*) asking him to block the publication of Thomas Wright's *Life of Charles Dickens*, as well as later writing to Gladys Storey bemoaning the fact that Marie was not shown a manuscript of *Dickens and Daughter* before publication (so that she could



prevent certain details being published). Of Wright, she even suggests to Ley that 'if in your review in "The Dickensian" you point out the inaccuracies and treat the book with the contempt it deserves, such treatment of it will be all the notice it requires.' (Dickens Museum, letter dated 3 October 1935)

*The Dickensian* and the Fellowship were clearly trying to shape the field of Dickens scholarship at this point, unable to prevent controversial books from being published but able to influence their reception. Following the publication of Wright's biography, Ley chased him through the newspapers over a period of several months by responding caustically to reviews of Wright in newspapers as diverse as *The Liverpool Post*, *The Nottingham Guardian*, *The Spectator*, *The London Mercury* and *The Methodist Times & Leader*, all rather masochistically kept by Wright in a scrapbook of reviews that is now in the Dickens Museum's possession. During a lengthy exchange in *The Liverpool Post*, C. E. Bechhofer Roberts, the author of the 1928 Mills and Boon novel about Dickens, *This Side Idolatry*, under the pseudonym 'Ephesian', entered the fray, demanding that both sides produce their evidence or end their dispute (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 December 1935). That such a call for common sense could come from the author of a Dickensian Mills and Boon novel (that itself presented Dickens as a canting, hypocritical figure, obsessed with his reputation and dismissive of his wife) speaks volumes about the nature of the debate, but the commitment to suppressing and discounting Wright was a serious undertaking for Ley and *The Dickensian*.

For almost the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Dickens Fellowship and remaining members of the Dickens family had worked together to maintain Dickens's image. However, when *Dickens and Daughter* was published in 1939, six years after the last of Dickens's children had died, it confirmed Dickens's affair with a young actress – for some, but not all, as the evidence could be dismissed as unsubstantiated gossip – through recounted conversations with daughter Katey. *The Dickensian*, faced with a scandal that undid decades of Dickensian image-making, denied even Katey's authority at this point, claiming that the account 'd[id] not ring true' ('Father and Daughter' 253). Tasked with choosing from among different accounts presented by different family members, a decision was made to privilege the accounts of Katey's siblings over hers. Katey claimed to have written a reminiscence of her father years before and destroyed it, instead extracting a promise from the author Gladys Storey, repeated in the book, to tell the 'truth' after her death (*Dickens and Daughter* 91). Interestingly, she seems to be the only one who saw 'truth' as any kind of priority, although this simple promise has a more complicated history: her publisher, Frederick Muller,

encouraged her to put the promise in the Preface because, 'You must remember that reviewers are very busy people and if you can give them something like this in a preface it draws their immediate attention to the book.' (Storey Papers, letter dated 2 May 1939)

The Storey Papers also show that Storey did consider this suggestion. A draft dated 4 May 1939 states that 'This volume is the outcome of a promise made by the author to Mrs Kate Perugini, to tell the "Truth" about the cause of the separation between her father and mother.' Next to it, in pencil, it says, 'I do not wish to have a preface or pre-note to my book, G. S.'. The quotation ultimately used, '... for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. St Matthew X. 26', perhaps represents a compromise, intended to tantalise the reader without focusing on the promise explicitly. In any case, the promise subverted the image created by the Dickens family and positioned the book as the first 'honest' picture of Dickens. The book still conveys Katey's love for her father but also a desire to defend her mother and tear down the image the family had worked so hard to create, perhaps best summed up in her famous letter to George Bernard Shaw many years before the book was even conceived of: 'If you could make the public understand that my father was not a joyous, jocose gentleman walking about the world with a plum pudding and a bowl of punch, you would greatly oblige me (Katey to George Bernard Shaw, December 1897 qtd. in Slater 201).

The suppression of Katey's account was largely successful at the time; *Dickens and Daughter* is no longer in print and remains a marginal text, particularly outside of academic study of Dickens.

The Fellowship, in contrast to the Boz Club, gave commemoration of Dickens to a wider group of people, and its influence has been felt throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, and is still felt today. This article has not touched on the other aims of the Fellowship from its inception, namely its pledge to 'spread the love of humanity', its commitment to 'campaign against those "social evils" that most concerned Dickens' and the pledge to 'assist in the preservation and purchase of buildings and objects associated with his name or mentioned in his works' ('History of the Fellowship'). Nevertheless, some aspects of Dickensian biography can still be traced back to the early efforts of Dickens's friends and family, and the process of selective commemoration that characterised Dickens's afterlife in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whether Dickens is a family man with a bowl of punch or somehow tainted by his connection with Ellen Ternan, at the heart of these attempts at image-making are questions about biographical legacy and acts of remembrance that are still of interest today – particularly

in light of the bicentennial celebrations of 2012, with their renewed public interest in Dickens's life and the new kinds of memorial acts that took place around the world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See John Camden Hotten's *Charles Dickens: The Story of His Life* and George Augustus Sala's *Charles Dickens*, both published in July 1870.

<sup>2</sup> See also Leo Mason's 'The Dickensian, A Tale of Fifty Years' (*The Dickensian* 51), Michael Slater's "'The Dickensian'" at 90: A Celebration of the First Three Editors 1905-1968' (*The Dickensian* 91.437) and the series on 'The Fellowship in Retrospect', beginning with Dexter's piece in 1943 (*The Dickensian* 40.269).

<sup>3</sup> See Margot Finn's *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The *Fortnightly Review* argued that 'No formal portrait could be half so vivid. In this book, which was never intended to be a book, we come nearer to the man as he was than a biographer would have brought us' (845).

<sup>5</sup> See Arthur Adrian's *Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle* (1957) for a detailed account of Georgina's role in maintaining Dickens's reputation.

<sup>6</sup> The full story is given by W. J. Carlton in 'Dickens's Forgotten Retreat in France', published in *The Dickensian* in 1966.

<sup>7</sup> For the London celebrations of Dickens in 2012, see Peter Kirwan and Charlotte Mathieson, 'A Tale of Two Londons: Locating Shakespeare and Dickens in 2012' in *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year* (2015).

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# ‘Mr Gridley’s Room’: Larkin and Dickens

JOHN BOWEN

WE ARE NOT LIKELY to think of Dickens as an important influence on the poetry of Philip Larkin. The title of ‘Dockery and Son’ may nod to *Dombey and Son* but Dickens’s sociable and expansive fiction seems far away from Larkin’s compact lyrics of solitude and withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> One is the product of a maximising, the other a minimising, literary art. Indeed, Larkin’s antipathy to Dickens is clear from early in his career: in a 1951 letter, when he was in his late twenties, he registered an irritable impatience with ‘the whole Dickens method’, which he described as

less ebullient, creative, vital, than hectic, nervy panic-stricken. If he was a person I should say “you don’t have to entertain me, you know. I’m quite happy sitting here”. The jerking of your attention, with queer names, queer characters, aggressive rhythms, piling on adjectives – seem to me to betray basic insecurity in his relation with the reader. How serenely Trollope, for instance, compares. I say in all seriousness that, say what you like about Dickens as an entertainer, he cannot be considered a real writer at all; not a real novelist. His is the garish, gaslit, melodramatic barn (writing that phrase makes me wonder if I’m right!) where the yokels gape: outside is the calm, measureless world, where the characters of Eliot, Trollope, Austen, Hardy (most of them) and Lawrence (some of them) have their being. However, I much enjoyed *G.E.* & may try another soon.<sup>2</sup>

The contrast between Dickens and Trollope is an enduring one, and a later letter to Barbara Pym confirms the same judgement more succinctly: Trollope’s novels ‘are so *grown up*, to my mind, beside Dickens’s three-ring circuses’.<sup>3</sup>

The dislike is not surprising: both temperamentally and politically the two authors were at opposite poles, and neither in his childhood nor as an undergraduate at Oxford is Larkin likely to have encountered any strong advocates of Dickens’s work. At home, Larkin recalls in ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, although ‘our house contained ... the principal works of most main English writers’ together with a good collection of more modern authors such as Hardy, Wilde and Shaw, ‘there were exceptions, like Dickens’.<sup>4</sup> His undergraduate lodgings may have been ‘filled with junk

from India and China and volumes of Dickens etc.’ but, like the accompanying junk, Dickens was treated at Oxford at the mid-century with widespread scholarly disdain.<sup>5</sup> There are only a few references to his novels in Larkin’s letters and reviews and those are mainly dismissive ones: *Little Dorrit* is ‘dreary tack’, *Dombey and Son* ‘a dreary-sad book... as if he was deeply depressed by things’.<sup>6</sup> Dickens exemplifies creative egoism for Larkin, ‘one of those great men ... in whom a horny sheath of egoism protects their energy, not allowing it to be dissipated or turned against itself’, but was never, it seems, a creative influence.<sup>7</sup>

But, as their published letters show, Larkin’s friend and lover Monica Jones encouraged him to read Dickens in the early 1950s when he worked at the University libraries of Belfast and Hull. His responses to her suggestions are mixed and sometimes decidedly hostile, but there is one novel, *Bleak House*, which he read several times and responded to exceptionally warmly: ‘I do like it. There is more to thrill, & less to irritate or bore, me than in any other I’ve read.’<sup>8</sup> A particular passage of dialogue stuck in his mind. He wrote to Jones: ‘I’ve just reached those wonderful pair of lines I’d use for a book of ghost stories if I wrote one - “As to dead men, Tony,” ... Do you remember it? In the chapter called *The appointed hour*, or something like that.’<sup>9</sup> The passage that he so admired occurs in chapter 32, almost at the exact centre of the novel:

‘It’s far from a pleasant thing to be plotting about a dead man in the room where he died, especially when you happen to live in it.’

‘But we are plotting nothing against him, Tony.’

‘May be not, still I don’t like it. Live here by yourself and see how *you* like it.’

‘As to dead men, Tony’, proceeds Mr. Guppy, evading this proposal, ‘there have been dead men in most rooms.’

‘I know there have; but in most rooms you let them alone, and – and they let you alone,’ Tony answers.<sup>10</sup>

The two characters who have this eerie exchange in an ‘unbearably dull, suicidal room’ are Mr Guppy, a lawyer’s clerk in pursuit of the novel’s heroine, Esther Summerson, and his friend Toby Jobling, alias Weevle.<sup>11</sup> Weevle has moved into the vacated room of the recently expired law-writer, Nemo, who we later learn is in fact Captain Hawdon, the lover of Lady Dedlock and father of Esther. As Guppy and Jobling talk, a strange smell permeates the air; it is the smoke and fumes from the spontaneous



combustion of the landlord, Krook, who lived downstairs. Although such a fictional world seems far from the solitary unhappiness that is often the emotional centre of Larkin's best work, Guppy's and Jobling's exchange seems to have played an important role in the genesis of one of his most admired poems, 'Mr Bleaney'.

It is likely that Larkin's idea of 'a book of ghost-stories' was simply a fancy, as by this time he seems to have abandoned his ambitions as a writer of fiction. But the idea that the presence of the dead may linger on in rooms to disconcert their present-day inhabitants stayed with him, purged of Dickens's supernatural and gothic colouring. The 'wonderful pair of lines' is most likely to be a reference to Guppy's 'As to dead men, Tony ... there have been dead men in most rooms' but Jobling's 'Live here by yourself and see how *you* like it' matters too. Guppy is trying to be reassuring at this point but his consolation has a built-in terror that Larkin is fully alive to. This is unsurprising, as it is preceded by a particularly evocative passage of Dickens's prose:

Both sit silent, listening to the metal voices, near and distant, resounding from towers of various heights, in tones more various than their situations. When these at length cease, all seems more mysterious and quiet than before. One disagreeable result of whispering is that it seems to evoke an atmosphere of silence, haunted by the ghosts of sound - strange cracks and tickings, the rustling of garments that have no substance in them, and the tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow. So sensitive the two friends happen to be, that the air is full of these phantoms; and the two look over their shoulders by one consent, to see that the door is shut.<sup>12</sup>

Not long after he read those words, Larkin began his poem about exactly the situation described by Jobling, of a man living by himself in an 'unbearably dull, suicidal' rented room in which the previous inhabitant, another solitary man, seems to have died.

Larkin, of course, was not just drawing on Dickens. As Andrew Motion has shown, his own experience of renting a flat in Cottingham, near Hull, at exactly this period is a strong presence in the poem.<sup>13</sup> Although he had drawn on Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, for his 1950 poem 'Deceptions', 'Mr Bleaney' has a more subtle relationship to its inspiration. For, like the poem, *Bleak House* is a story about the sadness and solitude of unmarried men, and the presence of death in their lives. In the midst of the complex, multiple actions of the book are two characters, both at the very margins of society and domestic life,

both solitary bachelors in hired rooms. The first is the dead man, Captain Hawdon, known as Nemo, whose ghost Jobling fears; the other is the ‘man from Shropshire ... who can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence after making it desolate for a quarter of a century’.<sup>14</sup> We later learn that his name is Gridley, a name that Larkin remembers and puts to good use: in the earliest drafts of the poem, as Archie Burnett records in his comprehensive *Complete Poems*, Mr Bleaney is called ‘Mr Gridley’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Bleaney’ retains the two syllables of Gridley’s name but also incorporates the ‘Bleak’ of the novel from which he comes. Its mingling of ‘bleak and ‘mean’ causes Dickens’s title word to hover over both Larkin’s title and poem, present and absent like Bleaney himself.<sup>16</sup>

Admirers of Larkin have sometimes anticipated what his manuscripts and letters show: the word ‘bleak’ often appears in critical accounts of the poem, as when Laurence Lerner describes it as one of Larkin’s ‘bleakest and most powerful’ poems, and Janice Rossen sees the poem as having ‘the strange, lucid quality of a murder mystery or spy novel, where the investigator tries to reconstruct a dead or departed man’s life’.<sup>17</sup> Guppy’s remarks in *Bleak House* made Larkin first think of a volume of ghost stories and his critics of a murder mystery, but what is so distinctive, indeed Larkinesque, about the poem that resulted is how firmly it resists such possibilities. Jobling is afraid of ghosts but there is nothing ghostly about Bleaney; the dread comes not from any kind of uncanny or ghostly return but from the very lack of such a possibility. Both Jobling and the narrator of ‘Mr Bleaney’ are afraid, but in very different ways. Jobling’s fear is of the anger or visitation of the dead; the fear in ‘Mr Bleaney’s room’ is not that the dead will return to haunt the living but that the banality of what they leave behind - ‘Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb’ - maps out an equally futile and empty life to come.<sup>18</sup> The poem is strikingly inexplicit about what has happened to Bleaney; we do not even know for certain that he is dead, although most readers infer that he is. Larkin’s is a world not hyperbolically charged with meaning, suspense and excitement like Dickens’s, but stripped of them, placed not near the centre both of London and one of the most complex of all Victorian plots but in a consciously marginal, empty, and unplotted room and story. Both, though, concern ‘dread’, in *Bleak House* of the ‘tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow’; in ‘Mr Bleaney’ of ‘the dread/ That how we live measures our own nature’, as Jobling and Larkin’s unnamed narrator learn to live in a room, like most rooms, in which dead men have been.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012) 427.

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- <sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 53.
- <sup>3</sup> Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, (London, 1992), 440.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Reviews 1952-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 2002), 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, (London, 1994), 74.
- <sup>6</sup> Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 324 and 428.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, (London, 1992), 154.
- <sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 114.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971), 507-8.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, 503.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 507.
- <sup>13</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, (London, 1994), 247-8.
- <sup>14</sup> *Bleak House*, p.52.
- <sup>15</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 394.
- <sup>16</sup> David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (London, 1973), 97.
- <sup>17</sup> Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin: Writers and their Work*, (Plymouth, 2005), 21; Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*, (Brighton, 1989), 137.
- <sup>18</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 50.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.

# Dickens in my Life

JEREMY CLARKE

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*His book The Charles Dickens Miscellany was published by The History Press in 2014.*

I THOUGHT OF DICKENS the other day when I made a little girl cry. Actually, not that little. I was teaching a year 4 class in a school in North Kent – so that's an audience of 8- and 9-year olds. Me and a box of objects. Nothing alarming either: like many museums that have been around for a while we have some fairly nasty stuff buried in our collection, but there was none of that on show here. If you are going to trade in surprises, they need to be managed very carefully. But she cried. Just me, talking. 'You would have felt (as I did)', wrote Charles to Catherine after reading *The Chimes* to his weeping friends, 'what a thing it is to have Power.'

On the way back to Rochester in the car, I thought about it a bit more. This school had called me to ask about the chance of some support in teaching the Ancient Egyptians. It has always been one of the few subjects I have avoided simply because of a lack of material. Rochester has had a museum for more than a hundred years and has acquired many cast-off collections from well-travelled sections of the local population, but hardly anyone seems to have visited Egypt. Or maybe they just kept their souvenirs. On this one occasion, for some reason or another, I decided to do it. We had a few objects: I guessed the kids would know things: I could look up some 'magic': it wasn't hard to see a Pharaoh's tomb taking shape in the classroom. And it had gone really well. I like to think I always listen to children when I am teaching; on this visit, it was easy. Conscious of the shortcomings of both my knowledge and my objects, I realised my audience was, itself, by far the most compelling resource available to our shared process of imaginative reconstruction. Everyone wanted to be

dead, of course, and with a willing volunteer and my tourists' shabti, we got our mummy and our tomb. But we also got tears. Now, mummification fascinates many children because of its aggressive manipulation of the physical body, and its strenuous and imperfect attempts to resist the process of decay. I guessed that my description was responsible for the distress. Despite the graphic (and frankly alarming) pictures available in the most popular children's books on the subject, and my own previous museum experiences of seeing children untroubled by contact with actual dead people, something about me talking made it upsetting. Made it real.

I have spent almost my entire working life sharing and exploring museum objects with children in London and north Kent. I came to that very much from an education perspective, training as an English teacher and getting side-tracked by a fascination with material culture. With stuff. Bits and pieces. And there is not a place on this earth more appropriate for indulging a passion for unaccountable clutter than within the stores of a long-standing, long-collecting, local history museum such as the Guildhall in Rochester. Striving as all cultural institutions do today to appear coherent, justifiable, engaging and accessible, there is still at the heart of many of our historic collections a random chaos of decay, tedium, danger and incomprehensible variety. We just lock it up and alarm at night.

I spend so much time talking about this stuff that I have to leave it behind at the end of the day. Of course I visit museums, galleries and old places in my own time, but I don't know that I am able to engage my professional eye with any success. I might learn more if I did: but I'd miss out on a holiday. Dickens has become the one strong bridge between work and home, between the private and the professional, with all that means for inspiration, motivation, creativity and confusion. My private reading of Dickens's novels has certainly informed my work at the Guildhall (as has – very importantly – living in north Kent), and researching and teaching Dickens in a museum context has sent me back to the books with a still greater appetite. I can describe this both in terms of my own secret relationship with the artist – that is, as a private reader engaging with the world of his novels – and my understanding as a professional educator of the same man performing and interpreting his own work.

But first, some background. The current Guildhall Museum collection was established in another historic local building – Eastgate House – in 1897. The date is significant. At that time Rochester and Strood were in the middle of a vigorous process of change that was to deliver them into the twentieth century as the almost unrecognisable descendants of their early Victorian identities, their profile bruised by the advent of aggressive

industrial development. This was about cement: its appetite for the raw material of chalk and mud ate up the Medway valley, and its factories spread dust and smoke over the historic buildings of the city. The Rochester of Mr Pickwick seemed to vanish along with the bridge (in 1857). The impulse to re-imagine the city and fix its heritage in the public mind must have stimulated the desire for a local museum, and Dickens must always have been part of that plan. Not only had he lived nearby, both in Chatham as a boy and in Higham for the final ten years of his life, but also his work reached back into the supposed pre-industrial local past – or at least a past free of the railway and the factory chimney.



Dr Jeremy Clarke and the 'shining black portraits' in Rochester's Guildhall.  
Photo courtesy of Guildhall Museum, Rochester.

Within a very short space of time, the museum had attracted a premium donation: the collection of Percy Fitzgerald, friend and colleague of Dickens (and first President of the Dickens Fellowship). Most of the material was printed matter and ephemera – early editions, pirate editions, rare editions, reviews and articles – but there was a small number of objects which became the core of our (still small) Dickens collection. This is the basis of what I think of as my 'heritage' Dickens work, developing a version of his life which I can support in a coherent way with the all-important physical evidence. But because our wider collection is both so various and so ordinary, I have been able to grow this heritage Dickens into a writer as well as just a man. So that we can explore, for instance, *Great Expectations* and the essays of the 1860s, by considering the artist returning to the scenes of his childhood and some of the sources of his inspiration. The Theatre,



Travel, Crime, Education, Home, Death, the Poor and Local Government become respectively playbills, turnpike tickets, irons, slates, tallow candles, mourning jewellery, workhouse equipment and the Guildhall itself – the location for the young Pip to receive his indentures, beneath the ‘shining black portraits on the walls’.

There’s more, I think. My private reading of Dickens does not provide merely *content* for that part of my professional life I spend in front of an audience. It’s also about technique. Of all writers, Dickens must be the most interested in the strange familiarities that animate our material worlds. Is there another novelist who can give such texture to his fictional settings – making them not inert matter, not a backdrop to action, but instinct with life, like a hypertext of narratives all clicked at once? This is why he is so good with working lives: the everyday repeated, interactive eloquence of body with object, person with thing. It is a critical commonplace that he mixes up the living and the lifeless and describes one as if it were the other, but I think that misses something of the complex interaction of the two. Let me give an example.

When Pip and Bentley Drummle have their ridiculous rivalry over the fire at the Blue Boar in chapter 43 of *Great Expectations*, the waiter is driven to distraction by Pip’s refusal to relinquish the fire to Drummle and sit down to eat his breakfast. He can’t *say* anything, of course. So object and character – both, in this instance, transient and insignificant – are brought together in the most persuasive way as the waiter feels ‘the fast cooling tea-pot with the palm of his hand’, incorporating this professional gesture with an ‘imploring look’ directed at Pip. A wave of exhilaration sweeps through me as I read these few words. Who knew there was life there? Who knew? It is as if a piece of the scenery has spoken, which it has. ‘Todo es puerta,’ wrote the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, ‘everything is a door.’ Dickens’s treatment of the teapot, through the agency of the waiter, allows us to see into a space where no space was. The ‘door’ of the teapot gives us a glimpse of an unrealised happening – the unwritten narrative that follows the waiter into the kitchen where he mutters about Pip’s behaviour. It is the spoilt tea poured away. It is the Blue Boar that Dickens didn’t bother to write down. It is also superb museum education. I can’t think of a better way of describing what is at the heart of learning from objects. I’m not interested in finding the answer to something, I don’t really care about What Is This? and What Is It Made Of?, but with the stuff in our hands we can find worlds where there were none, touch the unsuspected, unrealisable, unapparent, *other* life.

But we have been neglecting our tearful student. She was not reading about Ancient Egypt in a book, or even looking at objects in a display; I was there teaching. My job is to facilitate this encounter between person and thing, to help people make

satisfactory meanings out of the resources we manage. I have thought a lot about how Dickens grasped the opportunity later in life to facilitate his readers' experience of shared material – his own work. He was certainly not frightened of tears. Just as he was sensitive to the approval of his readership through the medium of sales, so he sought explicitly a direct and visible engagement in live performance: 'If you feel disposed as we go along to give expression to any emotion, whether grave or gay, you will do so with perfect freedom from restraint, and without the least apprehension of disturbing me.' Although Dickens eventually dropped these prefatory remarks, his manner was carefully constructed to suggest a relaxed receptiveness open to interactions – to create the ambience of 'the quiet narration of a story by one's fireside', as a reviewer noted in 1862. It emphasised the sensation of physical nearness, but also a shared status, an equality enshrined in the act of performance. I am always hoping to generate this feeling of sharing, of *joint* discovery. Working with all the advantages I am awarded in the classroom by being an outsider, a non-school educator, I am able to put on and lay aside the status of teacher in response to circumstances. It's all – gently – rather underhand, but I am helped by years of familiarity with the complex signals children pick up in school relating to classroom arrangement, ways of physically sitting, tone of voice, language, gesture and timing. It is quite possible to organise the beginning of a session as a 'teacher' and get what you need for the thing to work, while slowly allowing a more informal approach to take over.

In all teaching of course there is an element of performance. And in the heritage sector, it is not hard to find educators who favour an approach that requires them to lead from the front 'in role'. Indeed costumed interpretation is a thoroughly well-established technique on both sides of the learning see-saw – it is used both as a way of understanding history as well as a way of teaching it. I never dress up. In fact I think the key to understanding the impact on my poor year 4 participant is that I was most definitely acting *not-acting*. Though clearly I was not a class teacher either. No mask of authority, no institutional air. I had found my way to a performed normality, but one tense with precipitate discovery: as safe as a book but as open as the world. By setting aside all the comfortable signs of tale-telling, of once-upon-a-time and there-were-three-pigs, I hid my narrative behind an accidental face. No strange clothing, no special arena: I may as well have gone in and said, Let's not pretend.

Thinking about how Dickens's readings might have 'worked' has helped me to understand what it is I do, what might be special, what can be repeated, and (inevitably) what can be measured. The key strangenesses of the public readings seem to me to be linked

to their performed naturalness: their daring lay in their refusal to elevate wholly public material – no ‘special effects’ awaited the unsuspecting ticket holders, who got entirely what they paid for. This put Dickens in the hands of his audience and the event at the mercy of their relationship. Of course Dickens’s own marvellous fictions were nominally the subject of the performance, and hardly needed elevating, but the point was that these were the acknowledged public shape of his art. Dickens’s tools – desk, gaslight, paper knife (at first), flask, *book* – were identifiably ordinary. He took up something that was already of the world, that was shared and known. Of course, in fact, we know how much work he put into changing his published writings to make them suitable for his readings, but it would have been impossible to make them new. Dickens’s fiction had turned up all over – in booklets, in volumes, in pictures, on the stage, in advertisements, in fashion and in letter writing. How was he, or anyone, to kidnap his characters from public consciousness and ransom them back to each audience each night: to give them back something that was already eternally theirs?

And yet: ‘Until you have made Toots’ acquaintance through the medium of Dickens,’ wrote Kate Field of his *Dombey and Son* readings, ‘you have no idea how he looks or how he talks.’ Dickens used his audiences to inaugurate his work, every time. They might have it already, but what they had was private and dispersed. This was collaborative, a process involving the ‘real’ writer, his readers and the work, to welcome it into meaning. When I join a group of children to look at an object from the collection, and we have taken it off display and have it in our hands, we have to join in urging it towards a negotiated idea, to release it into an acceptable coherence, and make it part of the real. At times during certain performances Dickens was seen to laugh with genuine surprise at his writing, as though discovering it for the first time. Which of course, in a way, he was. And so I find myself somehow with the same object in my hand that I had there yesterday, and the day before, and the same words in my mouth, and they come out as though I just thought of it and it’s new. Which, of course, in a way, it is. It wasn’t *this* object, *here*, yesterday. It wasn’t *these* words, in front of *you*. Each moment is what we have made; each object is only what we see. What is it? We’ll decide. Everything is situated. All truths are performative truths. I’m not sure great artists are here to teach us things, but if I was presumptuous enough to suggest that I had learnt anything from reading one, it would be this.