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# London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

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**Christmas Lunch** Dickens Fellowship Central, **Sat 7 December** at the George and Vulture. Details will be posted on the website and emailed to members very soon. **Birthdays dinner** at the Garrick, **5 Feb 2025**. Details will be available in January. *The Dickensian* is now back on track, thanks to Cathy Waters and team. The spring and summer 2024 issues have gone out and winter 2024 will be ready by the end of the year. The programme of events and meetings for 2025 is almost ready and will soon appear on the website.

**Our President, Lucinda Dickens Hawksley**, has written a new book full of fascinating facts and figures about the Christmas season and the ways in which it was celebrated by Dickens and his contemporaries. Entitled *Victorian Christmas; Traditional Recipes, Decorations, Activities and Carols*, the book is published by Countryman Press and is currently available for about £15 in bookshops and online.

Lucinda's earlier book, *Dickens & Christmas* (Pen & Sword Books, 2017), is also still available for a similar price, so why not treat yourself or a fellow-Dickensian to both this Christmas?

**Wilkie Collins on Dickens** (recent *Times* article) Wilkie ranked CD's works from worst to best. *Barnaby Rudge* was "**the weakest book that D ever wrote**". "**No intelligent person could read *Dombey and Son* without astonishment at the badness of it**". He considered *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* Dickens's "**last laboured effort, the melancholy work of a worn out brain**". *David Copperfield*, regarded by many as Dickens's masterpiece, is simply "**incomparably superior to *Dombey***", while *Oliver Twist* is a "**wonderful book**" held back by one defect: "**the helplessly bad construction of the story**". "**The character of Nancy is the finest he ever did... That the same man who could create Nancy created the second Mrs Dombey is the most incomprehensible anomaly that I know of in**

**literature.**" At the top of the list was *Martin Chuzzlewit*, "**in some respects the finest novel he ever wrote**". He then added another dig at *Dombey*: "**That Chuzzlewit delighted his readers, and so led to a large sale of the next book, '*Dombey*', I don't doubt**". The list was found scribbled in his copy of John Forster's "The Life of Charles Dickens", written after the novelist's death in 1870. On the first page, where Forster proclaims "Charles Dickens, the most popular novelist of the nineteenth century", Collins adds: "**after Walter Scott**". The book was sold at auction in 1890 and its whereabouts are unknown. His reviews, however, were recorded in the January 1890 issue of the Pall Mall Gazette, in a preview for the auction. **Now the Dickens Museum is urging anyone with knowledge of its whereabouts to get in touch....**

... **Wilkie Collins might approve...** "*It's 1979. You can tell because 16-year-old David has posters on his bedroom wall of Debbie Harry, Sting and Kate Bush. Oh, and because he can't be open about his homosexuality and the bullies at his south London school are gay-bashing as well as racist. Could being cast as Nancy in the school production of '*Oliver!*' be the catalyst to accept himself as well as to being accepted? It's not the biggest spoiler to suggest that it could.*" (Review of a new musical, "**Becoming Nancy**", about to open at Birmingham Rep, *Times*, 18 Oct.).

**Topical?** In *American Notes*, written after his US tour of 1842, CD quotes a dialogue which, he says, "I have held a hundred times. **'Is it not a very disgraceful circumstance that such a man as So-and-So should be acquiring a large property by the most odious and infamous means, and notwithstanding all the crimes of which he has been guilty, should be tolerated and abetted by your Citizens? He is a public nuisance is he not?'** 'Yes, Sir'. 'A convicted liar.' 'Yes, Sir.' 'He has been kicked and cuffed and caned?' 'Yes, Sir.' 'And he is utterly dishonourable, debased and profligate?' 'Yes, Sir'. 'In the name of wonder, then, what is his merit?' 'Well, Sir, he is a smart man.'"

**Dickens and names** Further to an item in the last LP, I came across an article in the *Times* from a few years ago, advertising a book called “The Artful Dickens” by John Mullan. It seems that CD kept scrap bags of improbable names jotted down from Privy Council education lists, such as: *Henry Ghost, Walter Ashes, William Why, Robert Gospel, Rosetta Dust, Miriam Denial, Sophia Doomsday...* Many of CD’s characters have weird surnames, such as Spottletoe, Tulkinghorn, Turveydrop, but the first names are usually more conventional. An exception is featured in *Great Expectations*: “*Joe kept a journeyman at weekly wages whose name was Orlick. He pretended that his Christian name was Dolge – a clear impossibility – but he was a fellow of that obstinate disposition that I believe him to have been the prey of no delusion in this particular, but wilfully to have imposed that name upon the village as an affront to its understanding.*”

**The path of virtue** There was a big fuss recently when a “Strictly Come Dancing” participant was filmed putting his arm round a girl’s waist, only to have her remove it. This reminded me of a scene in *Great Expectations*, where Mr Wemmick’s “Aged Parent” is reading aloud from the newspaper, with Wemmick, Pip and a lady called Miss Skiffins as his audience. “*As Wemmick and Miss Skiffins sat side by side, and as I sat in a shadowy corner, I observed a slow and gradual elongation of Mr Wemmick’s mouth, powerfully suggestive of his slowly and gradually stealing his arm round Miss Skiffins’s waist. In course of time I saw his hand appear on the other side of Miss Skiffins; but at that moment she neatly stopped him ... unwound his arm again as if it were an article of dress, and with the greatest deliberation laid it on the table before her.... By-and-by I noticed Wemmick’s arm beginning to disappear again, and gradually fading out of view. After an interval of suspense on my part that was ...almost painful, I saw his hand appear on the other side of Miss Skiffins. Instantly, Miss Skiffins stopped it with the neatness of a placid boxer, took off that girdle or cestus as before, and laid it on the table. Taking the table to represent the path of virtue, I am justified in stating that during the whole time of the Aged’s reading, Wemmick’s arm was straying from the path of virtue and being recalled to it by Miss Skiffins*” ...

... I think it’s unusual for CD to use an obviously Latin/Greek word such as “*cestus*”, meaning belt or girdle – as we know, he disliked the formal classical education of the era. ‘*The cestus of Venus*’ is an expression used by the Roman poet Martial; perhaps Dickens was tickled by its inappropriateness in this context – Miss Skiffins being a very nice lady, but possibly not a Venus!

**Everyman I will go with thee...** A *Times* article (26 Oct) mentions books that comforted Russian dissident Alexei Navalny during his incarceration in solitary in a penal colony. Unsurprisingly, *War and Peace* was his favourite book. He found *Madame Bovary* disappointing, not a patch on *Anna Karenina*. He loved to read in English and re-read *Vanity Fair*, calling it, however, “**a really dull, crappy novel full of third-rate satire, but so well known that for the sake of decency it has to be read**”. He read *Oliver Twist*, but winced when Dickens mimics the accents of the Victorian underclass. (“**He is hopeless at it.**”) I’m glad to say that he nevertheless “**really enjoyed**” it. He even managed to write his own book, part memoir, part diary, called “**Patriot**”. He was of course murdered in the prison on Putin’s orders in February this year.

**Notes from the Charles Dickens Museum – From Wed 13 Nov 2024 through to Sun 5 Jan 2025**, the Charles Dickens Museum at 48 Doughty Street will be imbued with an extra glow of warmth and cosiness, as the home in which Dickens and his family celebrated Christmas is decorated in authentic Victorian style. There will be, *inter alia*: remarkable **live performances of Dickens’s Christmas stories by James Swanton**; and enchanting Magic Lantern shows by internationally acclaimed maestros, Jeremy and Carolyn Brooker. **Dates: 30 Nov, 1 Dec 2024** at 11:30am, 1pm, and 3pm each day (shows last approximately 30 minutes). **Prices:** £15 Adult; £12.50 Concession; £10 Under 16; a chance to spend **Christmas Eve** in Dickens’s home, amid Victorian style decorations and live performances. Every guest receives a free mince pie and glass of mulled wine. You will be able to catch a glimpse of screened adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, celebrating how this wonderful Christmas tale has inspired generations. Every visitor who books a Christmas Eve ticket in advance will have a chance of winning a Dickensian Christmas bumper prize. **Date: 24 Dec 2024** from 10am to 6pm (last entry at 5pm). **Prices:** £20 Adult; £15 Concession; £10 Child.

**Christmas at the forge: “Mr Wopsle said grace with theatrical declamation – as it now appears to me, something like a religious cross of the Ghost in Hamlet with Richard the Third – and ended with the very proper aspiration that we might be truly grateful” (*Great Expectations*). I would be truly grateful for any comments or contributions, please, to be sent to: Alison Gowans, Danesdyke, 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET or by email – [aligowans17@outlook.com](mailto:aligowans17@outlook.com)**