
London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

2012 - IT'S HERE AT LAST!

Already there has been an overwhelming amount of information on the bicentenary – films, documentaries, exhibitions, plays, radio readings and books of all kinds, plus numerous articles in the press (including the tabloids!).

Biographies of CD seem to be coming from all directions. There are several on sale at the Charles Dickens Museum. Come and have a look and take your pick – or buy them all! Remember, members have free entry, but the Museum will be closing for major refurbishment in April, so hurry.

You can buy: **Michael Slater's** highly-regarded, "definitive" *Charles Dickens*, **Claire Tomalin's** cradle-to-grave *Charles Dickens: A Life* - fast-moving, vivid and entertaining, as you would expect from the author of *The Invisible Woman* (re Ellen Ternan); a very readable, unusual, lavishly illustrated *Charles Dickens* by **Lucinda Dickens Hawksley**, produced in association with the Museum. Also available: *Dickens' Women* by **Miriam Margolyes**, based on her highly successful one-woman show; *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by **Jenny Hartley**, a cherry-picked collection of 405 letters out of the known 14,000. Coming soon: *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* by **Robert Douglas-Fairhurst**. It focuses on the 1830s and CD as a young man. Members will be able to hear the author speak at our meeting on 17th May.

Care of the Elderly Member Rose Heaward is interested in the likeness between an old lithograph by Honore Daumier of a French sick-nurse who looks identical to Sairey Gamp. Rose has a copy of the lithograph which was published two years before Sairey appeared in Martin Chuzzlewit and, in her book on Phiz, Valerie Browne Lester commented on the extraordinary likeness. There has been much recent publicity on the alleged lack of care for the elderly at home. Dickens brought the incompetence and indifference of the home sick-nurse to light in the character of Mrs Gamp – and it looks as though not much has changed....

A Black Fagin? A recent report in The Times quoted a report in 1834 of the extraordinary story of Henry Murphy, a 60-year old black man living in a "filthy lair" in Drury Lane, keeping 13 little girls whom he sent out to beg and thieve for him. He is described as having a face in which "cunning and ferocity were strongly blended". Police reported he was "in the habit of harbouring runaway children" and they were apparently living in fear from "threats of violence", but he claimed he "took them in out of charity".

..... **and a real life Dodger?** Cameron Nunn, a historian, recently researching child convicts transported to Australia in Victorian times at the National Archives in Kew, found an account of a 13-year old thief, Samuel Holmes, written in 1836 by a magistrate for a parliamentary committee. Holmes had been trained as a pickpocket in an East London hide-out almost identical to Fagin's den in Oliver Twist. Holmes said he had been taken to a house in Stepney run by a Jewish man and lodged on condition he gave all he could steal to the man. 13 boys lived there on the same terms. According to Old Bailey court records, the pint-sized fresh-faced Holmes had a happy-go-lucky personality. Holmes was sentenced to 7 years' transportation to Tasmania for stealing live birds and food. CD may have seen this item and many other reports like it when forming the character of the Dodger.

CD resolves a legal quibble A Court of Appeal judge turned to the work of CD when trying to resolve a dispute about a property lease in Hertfordshire (The Times 28.10.11). Lord Justice Rimer found a solution to the meaning of the word "adjoining" in Bleak House, where CD's description of the inquest on Krook at the Sol's Arms tavern "immediately adjoining Krook's premises" showed that "adjoining" may not necessarily mean "touching".

Gad's Hill From Ink Pellet magazine (November 2011): Head of English at Gad's Hill School, Paul Wadey, describes the privilege he felt in teaching English in the great man's final home. The school has now moved out from Dickens's former home into purpose-built premises nearby and Mr Wadey

says a little bit of magic will be lost and he is sad to leave the former bedroom which has been his classroom for some 10 years.

No cannibalism here! In his book (and new TV series) *Empire*, a history of the British Empire published last year, Jeremy Paxman makes several references to CD. In particular he refers to the disastrous Franklin Expedition to find the north-west passage in Canada in 1845, where the 120 explorers perished. In 1854, another explorer, John Rae, traced the remains of the bodies. Rae's report to the Admiralty shocked the country by suggesting there was evidence that the wretched explorers had been driven to cannibalism as a last resort. This was too horrifying for the British public to believe. CD argued in an article in "Household Words" that it could not possibly be true. He said British explorers would never resort to cannibalism. Despite being lost, shipless, forgotten, famine-stricken, weak, frozen, helpless and dying, it was "gigantically improbable that a religious English gentleman would resort to such conduct". Without a shred of evidence he accused the "Esquimaux".

Great Expectations – a rant from the Ed. The recent TV production was deeply depressing – a fashion-plate Pip, an ordinary-looking Estella, a humourless and reproachful Joe and a Magwitch who had obviously tucked into too much Christmas pudding on the Hulks - together with numerous pointless alterations to the plot. A magnificent opening (Magwitch swimming from the prison-ship and emerging from the water onto the marshes), but after that One saving grace was the portrayal of Herbert Pocket by the 28-year old actor Harry Lloyd, great-great-grandson of CD, who managed to inject humour into his part. Faith was partially restored by **Edwin Drood** a few days later, with a strong central performance by Matthew Rhys as Jasper; also the brilliant "**Arena**" TV production of the history of Dickens on film, produced by DF members, Michael Eaton and Adrian Wootton. Bliss!

Dickens and the Credit Crunch *A propos* the recent disgrace of (Sir) Fred Goodwin and severe criticism of bankers, CD put the best definition of the principle behind loans into the mouth of Mr Pancks in *Little Dorritt* – "Credit is a system whereby a person who cannot pay gets another person who cannot pay to guarantee that he can pay".

Cabinet reading To commemorate CD's bicentenary, the Culture Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, handed each of his Cabinet colleagues one of the author's novels. David Cameron got two – *Great Expectations* and *Hard Times*, Nick Clegg got

Oliver Twist (Please, sir, can I have some more power?), William Hague (Foreign Secretary) was given *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Michael Gove (Education Minister) got *A Child's History of England* .. and so on.

Dickens too difficult? DF member Claire Tomalin, in a recent interview with the Press Association, said that Dickens is "beyond" many modern children, who are being "reared on dreadful TV programmes and not being taught to read with the attention span necessary to appreciate his works". She goes on to say, his depiction of an unequal society is still "amazingly relevant".

Dickens Exhibitions Michael Slater draws attention to an exhibition of "Charles Dickens and Popular Culture" at Senate House Library, 4th Floor (South Block), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1, open until 9th July 2012, Monday – Saturday (closed 6th – 9th April and 4th/5th June). Admission free. Meanwhile, don't forget the excellent "Dickens and London" exhibition at the Museum of London.

JOB STILL VACANT – CHAIRMAN FOR THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP COUNCIL We still need someone to chair two Council meetings a year and currently four Management Committee meetings a year (all in London), plus the AGM of the Fellowship. Current Chairman Michael Rogers would be happy to talk to anyone who might be interested: m.rogers157@btinternet.com or 01384 873 100.

Forthcoming meetings:

Monday, 12th March – David Copperfield and Childhood; talk by Malcolm Andrews

Wednesday, 18th April – David Copperfield on screen; film evening with Tony Williams.

Both events to be held at 6.30 p.m. at Lumen, 88 Tavistock Place, WC1H 1HD.

Many thanks again to all our contributors. I'll continue, like Mr Micawber, to 'hope something will turn up'. Please send items to: Alison Gowans, "Danesdyke", 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email - aligowans@hotmail.co.uk