

Dickens BIRTHDAY Toast

I am honoured indeed to have been invited to propose the toast to The Immortal Memory this evening, and I'd like, with your indulgence, to ruminate on one of the terms in that toast – Memory.

This year we are celebrating the Centenary of the Fellowship's purchase of 48 Doughty Street. But there's also another anniversary which has just been slipping by, almost unnoticed. It has a particularly local significance for us here. Let me invite you, in imagination, to leave the Garrick Club now. Out of the Club's front entrance you turn right down Garrick Street and on into Bedford Street. It's just a 3-4 minute walk -- and you come to Chandos Place off to the right. Turn a few paces into Chandos Place, pause there and look across the road. A blue plaque on the building opposite tells you that Charles Dickens worked there, 1824-25. It is a bicentenary that Dickens himself might well have preferred not to be observed.

200 years ago, if you had stood on that same spot on a weekday daytime you might well have seen a small boy in the ground-floor window, rapidly pasting labels on little pots of shoe blacking. He would take a lunch break, which usually meant his crossing the road and going into the pub behind you. Day after day, week after week. Of this road and its pub he later said, 'the stones in the street may be smoothed by my small feet going across to it at dinner-time, and back again'.

Forster says of this period, probably paraphrasing Dickens's own words: 'it was a time of which he never could lose the remembrance, while he remembered anything, and the recollection of which, at intervals, haunted him, and made him miserable, to that hour'. We are already inside the shadowy world of *The Haunted Man* (1848), which was written around the time when Dickens unburdened himself of the memories of this period to Forster.

'Memory is my curse', says the phantom self of Redlaw, the haunted man in that Christmas Book. Memory, for him, was 'a tissue of sorrow and trouble'. Redlaw agrees in a Faustian pact to sacrifice his memory, even though he says he would rather not deprive himself 'of any *kindly* recollection, or any sympathy that is good for me, or others'. He is told that what he will lose will be 'the intertwined chain of feelings and associations, each in its turn dependent on, and nourished by, the banished recollections'. His wish is granted. Moments later he comes across a poor ragged boy, half-human half-wild beast, who before this change would have wrung his heart; but now, with his chilled heart, he recoils from him.

Dickens explained the story: 'Of course, my point is that that bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance, and that you could not choose the enjoyment of recollecting only the good. To have the best of it you must remember the worst also.'

What happened to the Haunted Man is another version of what had happened to Scrooge — the deliberate banishment of memory to try to heal an inner wound from the distant past. Scrooge likes to live in darkness ('darkness is cheap', he insists), an inner darkness as well as the outer one generated by city fog and winter gloom. So when the Ghost of Christmas Past arrives with that strange jet of light issuing from its head, Scrooge cannot bear the prospect of having his past so vividly illuminated. He asks the Spirit to put his extinguisher cap back on his head and block off the light of memory.

The Spirit leads Scrooge back to his childhood, to the place where he grew up, and introduces him to the sight of a lonely boy in a deserted classroom in an old mansion. Dirt and decay are setting in, and behind the old panelling in the wainscotted school-room can be heard the 'squeak and scuffle' of mice'. Dickens in his autobiographical fragment described the Hungerford Stairs blacking

warehouse as 'a tumble-down old house' with 'wainscotted rooms', and the sound of rats' with 'their squeaking and scuffling' all day long. Scrooge's old school sounds very much like a reprise of the Blacking warehouse, and the lonely child Scrooge a projection of Dickens's child-self. The *Carol* narrator described the little boy Scrooge as 'his poor forgotten self as he had used to be'. 'Forgotten' is an interesting term, here – it takes us back to Memory. Does it mean 'forgotten' by his family when all the other boys have gone home for the holidays, or 'forgotten' by the adult Scrooge, who has deliberately suppressed such memories? Or maybe both?

Neglect and loneliness and desertion by family. Dickens's drive in life was largely to compensate for these three experiences undergone during those Blacking Warehouse months at Hungerford Stairs and Chandos Street. He made up for by becoming internationally famous; he made up for loneliness by having a large family and a colossal readership (remarking how 'personally affectionate' people were...). And he made up for desertion by family in insisting on being a friend in thousands of people's homes. 'What an ambition it is to be admitted into many homes with affection and confidence', he wrote as he launched *Household Words*; 'to be regarded as a friend by children and old people; to be thought of in affliction and in happiness; to people the sick rooms with airy shapes 'that give delight and hurt not', to be associated with the harmless laughter and the gentle tears of many hearths.'

But sometimes – maybe most of the time? – all these compensating triumphs still couldn't stave off the haunting memory, as he told Forster: 'even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life'. And this man, who can so easily slide back into his child self, wanders back again to particular places that are indelibly stained with the memories of that past. They are journeys that have to be negotiated very gradually; 'It was a very long time before I liked to go up Chandos-street', he told Forster.

The revelations to Forster of that childhood time were made somewhere in the late 1840s. Now, in your imaginations again, move on another 20 years from the that time, and into the mid/late 1860s. Choose a weekday, late morning, and walk again back down to that north corner of Chandos Place, to the same spot, and loiter there for a bit. Look across the street – the blacking shop and the little boy in the window patiently labelling small bottles have long gone. But wait a minute! Just opposite to you, at the south corner of Chandos Place, where Bedford Street comes up from the Strand to join it, there's a curiously familiar elderly, wiry, bearded man, carrying a black briefcase, and striding up very briskly. He pauses briefly at the corner there, before turning right and disappearing down Maiden Lane. It looks very much like the older Charles Dickens, now in his mid-50s? Indeed it is...and we know this from Percy Fitzgerald's memories:

Often, about eleven o'clock, he was to be seen tramping briskly along the Strand, coming from Charing Cross Station, fresh from his pleasant country place in Kent, keen and ready for the day's work, and carrying his little black bag full of proofs and MS.... At Bedford Street, by the bootmaker's shop, he would turn out of the Strand -- those in the shops he passed would know his figure well, and told me, after his death, how they missed this familiar apparition -- would then post along in the same brisk stride through Maiden Lane, past "Rule's," where he often had his oyster, through Tavistock Street, till he emerged in Wellington Street. Percy Fitzgerald 'Charles Dickens in the Editor's Chair': *Gentleman's Magazine*, CCL(1881), 725-6.

The shortest distance from Charing Cross to Dickens's Wellington St office was straight down the Strand. Why did he take the more circuitous route up through the lanes above the Strand? Dickens's routine commute to work took him, by choice, along an avenue of memories. His journey

started from the country mansion he had idolised as a small boy from Chatham and then been able to buy and make his own home; his train took him up to Charing Cross, newly built right over the site of the Hungerford Blacking premises. From the station forecourt he chose to veer off the Strand and into Chandos Street, the site of the other Warren's Blacking premises. Did he pause there to glance down Chandos Street, perhaps to see if its stones were still those smoothed by his small feet forty years ago, crossing back and forth at lunch-times? Was this commuting journey a way of exorcising memory, or a way of joining the extremes of his life experiences together? – the world famous novelist and founder-editor of a magazine with its offices a few hundred yards from the spot where as a child he had sunk into despair at the terminal darkening of all his prospects? Perhaps it was Dickens's own personal version of Scrooge's pledge at the end of his tumultuous experiences in the *Carol*: 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.'

Dickens wound up the final double number of *Nicholas Nickleby* in the autumn of 1839, after nineteen months of serial instalments. He then drafted his Preface, which ended as follows:

the Author of these pages, now lays them before his readers in a completed form, flattering himself,... that on the first of next month they may miss his company at the accustomed time as something which used to be expected with pleasure; and think of the papers which on that day of so many past months they have read, as the correspondence of one who wished their happiness, and contributed to their amusement.

That's the relationship Dickens wanted with his reading public — a sense, fostered by his serial visits to people's homes, that he was almost a personal friend, that he was somebody who wanted us to miss him. He couldn't bear to be forgotten again ('his poor forgotten self'). Our Fellowship has responded, much in the way he would have wanted, I think. That distinctive relationship is expressed in the first of our Constitution's founding pledges, that the Fellowship should 'knit together in a common bond of friendship, lovers of that great master of humour and pathos, Charles Dickens'. It is a declaration of feelings about the *man* Charles Dickens, the man who wanted us to miss him.

His final statement on this came in his will. On his tomb he just wanted 'Charles Dickens' written, no 'Mr' or 'Esquire'. He is Charles Dickens, just as much the 12-year-old Charles in the Blacking Warehouse (who never became a 'forgotten self' to him), as he was the famous Charles Dickens known to the world. The only declared memories he wanted to leave were these: 'I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works, and to the remembrance of my friends upon their experience of me in addition thereto.' The Fellowship has always chosen both (as its name implies): we choose to remember him as somehow both a friend and the author of those magnificent published works.

TOAST --- "THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF CHARLES DICKENS"