

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69821-5 - Charles Dickens in Context
Edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Life and afterlife

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69821-5 - Charles Dickens in Context
Edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69821-5 - Charles Dickens in Context
Edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*The life of Dickens I: before Ellen Ternan**John Bowen*

Charles Dickens lived for fifty-eight years, about the average lifespan for the period, but there is little else ordinary or typical about his life, which witnessed unprecedented social, technological and political changes as dramatic as his own transformation from shrieking infant to world-renowned man of letters. His birthplace still stands in an attractive little terrace in Portsmouth, then on the main road to London, a modest house like thousands of others recently built at the fag end of the Napoleonic wars. Within a few months the family had moved, the beginning of a peripatetic childhood which saw fourteen changes of address in as many years.¹ Some of these moves are likely to have been flits, so his father (John Dickens, 1785–1851) could avoid paying the rent or rates. It could, perhaps should, have been a secure childhood in an insecure time, as his father had a responsible post with steady career progression, beginning as ‘a five-shilling-a-day 15th assistant Clerk’ to the Navy Pay Office and retiring twenty years later as a ‘£350-a-year Clerk of the 3rd class’.² The Dickens family were not rich by any means, but they should have managed to avoid the desperate poverty and exploitation that was common around them. It was a lower middle-class childhood, a world not too far from want but with aspirations to the dignities and pleasures of the genteel, a terrain that Dickens’s fiction would make his own. Charles was the second child of eight, two of whom, a brother and sister, died in infancy. Emotionally, he was closest to his elder sister Fanny (1810–48) and brother Fred (1820–68). His father’s parents had been in service, as butler and housekeeper to Lord Crewe; the family of his mother Elizabeth (1789–1863) were slightly superior, but overshadowed by her father’s fleeing the country when it was discovered that he had defrauded the Admiralty of more than £5,000, a very considerable sum at the time.

Portsmouth gave way to Chatham when Dickens was 4, a place (together with the neighbouring Rochester) that rubbed the salt of the

sea deep into his imagination and to which he returned over and again in his writing. Now we get some early glimpses of him, a bright, precocious boy performing comic songs and poems at the Mitre tavern.³ There were family visits to the pantomime and theatre, which established lifelong passions, and young Charles seems to have read a great deal, 'a terrible boy to read' as his nurse Mary Weller described him.⁴ As there was little literature written for children at this period, it was mainly the adult comic and adventure fiction of a generation or more earlier that formed his taste: Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Oliver Goldsmith and, above all, Tobias Smollett, the author of *Peregrine Pickle* and *Roderick Random* and translator of *Don Quixote* and *The Devil on Two Sticks*. He was fascinated by the shape-changing exoticism of the *Arabian Nights*, a constant imaginative resource in his later life, as well as James Ridley's pseudo-Persian *Tales of the Genii*. Goldsmith and Smollett had written about debtors' prison from personal experience so, however shocking his father's later imprisonment must have been, it was already a glimpsed possibility and the fiction seems to have been an important resource in learning to survive it. Apart from Elizabeth Inchbald's farces, his boyhood reading is an eighteenth-century male tradition: he does not seem to have read Jane Austen or Fanny Burney and later disapproved of the most original novelists among his contemporaries, Charlotte and Emily Brontë.⁵

What seems a happy and relatively stable childhood went acutely awry when Dickens was about 10 years old. Credit arrangements were a fixture of the early nineteenth-century economy, but Dickens's father's debts became progressively more acute, a process accelerated by the family's move to London in 1822. The Dickenses entered a spiral of decline: Charles was taken from school, more and more of the family's possessions were pawned and, eventually, in 1824 John Dickens was arrested and imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea prison. This was not unusual – most prisoners at the time were debtors – but it was clearly a traumatic experience for the family and tied knots in Dickens's imagination that he was to spend a lifetime unravelling. His sister Fanny continued as a student at the Royal Academy of Music while Charles, in sharp contrast, was sent out to work at Warren's Blacking, a rat-infested warehouse on the banks of the Thames, to stick labels on pots of shoe blacking for twelve hours a day. Murdstone and Grinby's, in *David Copperfield*, contains passages of direct transcription from a now lost autobiographical manuscript, parts of which later surfaced (sometimes through apparently direct quotation, sometimes through paraphrase) after Dickens's death in John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (3 vols., 1872–4).

The dates are not certain, but Dickens may have spent a year at Warren's (much longer than his father in prison) before being freed, a wretched and demoralising experience, but one that seems to have preserved a rich vein of childhood feeling and fantasy throughout his adult life. At some point, the firm moved to a shop near Covent Garden and Dickens then worked in a window, at times drawing a crowd to watch his dexterity, a performance both deeply shaming and a chance to gain a little attention and distinction. When he was finally released, he tells us, his mother Elizabeth, who had visited him at work at Warren's on many occasions, unforgettably and unforgivably, 'was warm for my being sent back'.⁶ The legacies of the Warren's episode are everywhere in Dickens's work, not only in its many prison scenes, debtors, vulnerable children and negligent parents, but also in its deep concern with questions of memory and the inescapability or otherwise of the shaping power of childhood experience and suffering. In contrast to many of his literary contemporaries, it gave him an inward and identifying sympathy for the poor and dispossessed, both founding and regularly refreshing his broadly radical political beliefs. The family's shame and refusal to speak about what happened was as important as the event itself: 'my father and my mother have been stricken dumb upon it'.⁷ Warren's went underground and became the reservoir of stories that Dickens had to tell (and to keep on telling in different ways throughout his life) but which he could never approach directly, not even to his children.

Dickens had been taught to read by his mother (who later, without any success, attempted to set up a school) and received a good – if relatively brief – education at Chatham. His release from Warren's was followed by two more years of indifferent schooling at the grandly named Wellington House Academy – the headmaster was a flogger – before his return to the world of work as a lawyer's clerk, aged 15. It was nothing special, although much better than Warren's, but Dickens took the chances that came his way and made many more of his own. He quickly ascended from shorthand court reporter to parliamentary reporter and then journalist, before publishing his first fiction ('A Dinner at Poplar Walk') at the age of 21. Shorthand parliamentary reporting gave him an ear acutely trained to individual speech patterns and a lifelong distaste for Parliament and all its ways; he would have witnessed the passage of the first Reform Act in 1832. Later in life, he refused a number of invitations to stand for Parliament. The law remained a perennial source of ambivalent fascination; he registered to read for the bar in 1839 and enquired about becoming a police magistrate in 1846, but neither scheme came to fruition. He took out a

reader's ticket to the British Museum on his eighteenth birthday and nursed powerful theatrical ambitions throughout his life, going to the theatre whenever he had a chance, but missing an audition at Covent Garden because of a heavy cold. There had been many earlier visits to the theatre, at one of which he saw the great clown Joseph Grimaldi, whose memoirs he was later to edit. The 'monopolylogue' performances of Charles Mathews were an especial favourite, influencing both his fictional characterisation and later career as a performer of his own work. We typically think of him as a Victorian, but nearly half of his life and all his formative years were over when the young queen came to the throne in 1837.

The first direct signs of his erotic life appear in a remarkable set of letters he sent in his late teens and early twenties to Maria Beadnell (1811–86). The daughter of a banker and thus socially well above the Dickenses (John Dickens's troubles did not end with the Marshalsea, and Charles was digging him out of financial scrapes for many years to come), she dominated his emotional life for four vital years. He was infatuated with her, but she felt less for him and, as her family did not approve, the relationship eventually broke down. She was later to re-establish contact, briefly reawakening Dickens's dormant feelings for her in 1856, before his rapid disillusionment. A much safer bet was found in the shape of Catherine Hogarth (1816–79), the daughter of a colleague on the *Morning Chronicle*, and they married in 1826. Although it was to end in spectacular unhappiness and acrimony, it seems to have been an affectionate and loving match for many years. Dickens was a caring and affectionate father and characteristically Victorian in his celebration of the domestic virtues. Catherine had three sisters, two of whom, Mary (1820–37) and Georgina (1837–1917), became central to Dickens's emotional life. Mary, as was common in the period, went to live with her sister and brother-in-law after their marriage, but died suddenly at age 17, in Dickens's arms in May 1837. Devastated by the loss, for the only time in his career he failed to produce his monthly instalment of fiction, and her figure can be traced in the many idealised young women in his fiction. Georgina was only 10 years old at the time of the marriage, but she was to play a vital role in Dickens's life, devoting herself to his welfare, first alongside her sister and then, more controversially, taking Dickens's side after his separation from Catherine, outfacing scandal to remain with him until the end. After his death, she acted as keeper of the flame, keeping

Dickens's secrets (particularly his long relationship with Ellen Ternan) firmly concealed.

The most striking fact about Dickens's professional life was the speed and variety of achievement. At 22, he was an unknown parliamentary reporter; at 25 he was internationally famous. In 1836, for example, the year that he turned 24, he published his first book (*Sketches by Boz: First Series*) and began publishing *Pickwick Papers* in monthly instalments, had a play (*The Strange Gentleman*) and an operetta (*The Village Coquettes*) produced, before agreeing to edit *Bentley's Miscellany*, a literary monthly magazine, and publishing a second volume of *Sketches* before the end of the year. The pace was breathtaking and did not slow for many years: by the time he was 30, in 1842, Dickens had published *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, together with a host of lesser projects. His family also continued to grow apace: his eldest child, Charley, was born in 1837, rapidly followed by Mary in 1838, Katey in 1839 and then six more sons, each named after a famous literary figure, and one daughter, Dora, who died in infancy. Dickens was, by all accounts, an affectionate and caring father, playful if controlling in his children's early years, but many of them were to disappoint him in their later lives, through returning to the family pattern of debt and unfulfilled promise. Dickens was fascinated by domestic detail and took meticulous care over household expenditure and decoration, but extrafamilial sociability was equally important, and was both a deep instinct and a central value. His gift for friendship structured his social life through strong homosocial bonds with other authors, including Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton and Wilkie Collins, painters and illustrators such as George Cruikshank, Daniel Maclise and Augustus Egg, and actors such as William Macready. His relations with William Makepeace Thackeray, to whom he was often critically compared, were more uneasy. His most important single friendship of these years was with John Forster, who was to correct his proofs, act for him in negotiations with publishers and in more intimate matters, and eventually to write his biography.

The records of Dickens's charity work are as astonishing as his fictional productivity and sociability. His friendship with Angela Burdett-Coutts, the richest heiress in England, led to his acting from the 1840s onwards as her unpaid almoner, dispensing help to a multitude of deserving personal cases and good causes. The most important of these was the Home for Homeless Women, or Urania Cottage, founded in

1847, which provided a generously funded refuge, together with education and training, for prostitute, criminal, and otherwise socially outcast and impoverished women who agreed to begin a new life overseas. Burdett-Coutts funded the home, but Dickens was its effective administrator, happy to rush across London to sort out the drains or face down a recalcitrant inmate. He willingly gave time, money and creative energy to many causes through speech-making, public readings and campaigning journalism, as well as many charitable subscriptions and gifts. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was hostile both to the evangelical colouring of many charitable ventures and to overseas missionary projects. His own religious beliefs were an undogmatic Anglicanism, although for a number of years he attended a Unitarian chapel. Hostile, if ambivalently so, to Roman Catholicism and to the Tractarian movement, his faith was sceptical of conventional piety, religious ritual and sermonising and had no interest in the niceties of theological debate.

Although Dickens is often seen as a quintessentially English writer, and the supreme chronicler of London life, he was also a keen and unchauvinistic traveller, spending lengthy periods of time in France, Switzerland, Italy and the United States. His first encounter with the United States, in 1844, marked a significant challenge to Dickens's political creed. His radicalism and strong modernising streak was tested by the endemic violence of social and political life in the republic, and he found the incipient 'celebrity culture' that he had to endure shockingly intrusive. Slavery he found repugnant. The years between the publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–4), which commemorated the American trip in Martin's stateside adventures, and *Dombey and Son* (1846–8) mark something of a watershed in Dickens's life and career. He was by now 'the most popular and widely read living author in both Europe and America'.⁸ After the frenetic activity of his first decade or so as a writer, he took the first significant sabbatical in his career, and marked a new seriousness in his vocation by a new complexity and thoroughness in the planning of his novels. It was also a time of important self-reflection. Sometime between 1845 and 1848 he wrote what has become known as the 'Autobiographical Fragment', and his works of this period, notably his fifth and final Christmas book of 1848, *The Haunted Man*, are deeply concerned with the question of memory in relation to childhood suffering. This movement of thought culminated in his most autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield* (1849–50), which incorporated much of his account of his early years at Warren's.

Having long meditated such a project, Dickens launched a weekly journal entitled *Household Words* in 1849. He had had abortive attempts at collaborative work before with his editing of *Bentley's Miscellany* between 1837 and 1839, the miscellany *Master Humphrey's Clock* and the liberal newspaper the *Daily News*, which he briefly edited at its launch in 1846. *Household Words*, however, proved to be a winning formula and, with its successor *All the Year Round*, Dickens until his death acted as 'conductor' of a weekly journal of fiction, topical journalism and essays. His loyalty to journalism was matched only by his love of the theatre. He was a remarkably gifted amateur actor and as a young man had arranged an audition at Covent Garden but had to cry off because of illness. The passion continued in a number of amateur performances, carried out with more than professional commitment, for a number of charitable causes, which happily combined theatricality, sociability and good work. Two of the most important of these were *The Lighthouse* and *The Frozen Deep*, both by Wilkie Collins, one of Dickens's most important new friendships, with whom he was to collaborate on Christmas numbers for *Household Words* and, later, *All the Year Round*. Although by the 1850s Dickens was financially secure and supreme in his art, his work showed a marked darkening of its vision in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Hard Times*. The deaths of his beloved sister Fanny in 1848 and of his father and little daughter Dora in 1851 were significant personal losses. He and Catherine had their tenth and final child, Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens ('Plorn') in 1852. The reappearance of Maria Beadnell (now Mrs Winter) in Dickens's life marked a renewed sense of discontent that was to lead to the final breakdown of his marriage. Although later he was to claim that the marriage had long been in trouble before its final, brutally accomplished, ending, it seems to have been a happy marriage until its final years, if one almost entirely dominated by the force of his own personality. A long-held ambition was fulfilled when in 1856 he bought Gad's Hill Place outside Rochester, a house that he had seen and admired as a boy, but he was never to live there with Catherine. When he did eventually move there, his personal, professional and literary lives had been radically transformed in the course of a cataclysmic midlife crisis.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Allen, *Charles Dickens' Childhood* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), 10.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 101.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69821-5 - Charles Dickens in Context
Edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux
Excerpt
[More information](#)

10

JOHN BOWEN

- 3 Ibid., 43.
- 4 Robert Langton, *The Childhood and Youth of Charles Dickens* (London: Hutchinson, 1912), 25.
- 5 Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), 885.
- 6 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872–4), vol. 1, 49.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 John Drew, 'Charles Dickens', in *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford University Press, 1999), 167.