

# The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits

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As uplifting as the tale of Scrooge itself, this is the story of how Charles Dickens revived the signal holiday of the Western world-now a major motion picture.

Just before Christmas in 1843, a debt-ridden and dispirited Charles Dickens wrote a small book he hoped would keep his creditors at bay. His publisher turned it down, so Dickens used what little money he had to put out *A Christmas Carol* himself. He worried it might be the end of his career as a novelist.

The book immediately caused a sensation. And it breathed new life into a holiday that had fallen into disfavor, undermined by lingering Puritanism and the cold modernity of the Industrial Revolution. It was a harsh and dreary age, in desperate need of spiritual renewal, ready to embrace a book that ended with blessings for one and all.

With warmth, wit, and an infusion of Christmas cheer, Les Standiford whisks us back to Victorian England, its most beloved storyteller, and the birth of the Christmas we know best. *The Man Who Invented Christmas* is a rich and satisfying read for Scrooges and sentimentalists alike.

LES STANDIFORD is the author of the critically acclaimed *Last Train to Paradise*, *Meet You in Hell*, and *Washington Burning*, as well as several novels. Recipient of the Frank O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, he is Founding Director of the Creative Writing Program at Florida International University in Miami, where he lives with his wife and three children.

In London, in 1824, it was the custom to treat a debtor little differently from a man who had reached into a purse and stolen a similar sum. In this case, he was a father of seven, and though he was gainfully employed, it was not gainful enough. His debt was to a baker, a man named Karr, who lived in Camden Street, and the sum was forty pounds, no small amount in those days, when an oyster was a penny, a whole salmon a pound and six, and a clerk who worked for a tightfisted miser in a countinghouse might not earn as much in a year.

Accounts were tallied, the sheriff was consulted, and men were sent in consequence. Our father—John his name, and thirty-seven—was taken by the sheriff's men to what was called a "sponging house," a kind of purgatory where those who could not meet their obligations were afforded some few days to seek relief from their creditors' charges, intervention from a person of influence, or possibly a loan from family or friends.

In this instance, help was not forthcoming. Two days passed with no good word, and then our John, officially an insolvent debtor, was passed along to the Marshalsea, imprisoned alongside smugglers, mutineers, and pirates. "The sun has set on me, forever," he told his family as he left.

One who tried to help was a son of John, who, then twelve, took a job, at six shillings a week in a tumbledown factory-house that sat on the banks of the River Thames. One day long afterward the boy would speak of the place, "Its wainscoted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffing coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of

the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again."

His job was to fill small pots with shoe blacking, and tie them off with paper, and then to paste on each a printed label. The boy worked ten hours a day, standing near a window for better light and where any passersby might see him, with a break for a meal at noon, and one for tea later on. And though the place was grim and the work was numbing, and this had put his childhood to an end, he worked on. For his father was in prison. For a debt of forty pounds. For his family's bread.

"My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations," the boy would one day write, "that even now . . . I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and [I] wander desolately back to that time of my life."

While these words testify to the force of a childhood blow, they also offer reassurance that there would one day come a lightening of his circumstances. That the boy would not spend forever in his dismal occupation, nor would his father stay forever in the Marshalsea, though there were three long months there, with our young man visiting his father in a tiny room behind high spiked walls, and where, the boy recalls, they "cried very much."

And where his father told him "to take warning by the Marshalsea, and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a year, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy; but that a shilling spent the other way would make him wretched." These words of caution, and lament, and more, and then at 10:00 p.m. the warning bell would toll and our young man of twelve would walk out into the foggy London night, five miles toward home, and some hours of oblivion before the scurrying, and the squealing, and the little pots of blacking came again.

The boy's name was Charles, of course, and his family's name was Dickens, and most who have commented on the life of the famed author have observed that those sorry experiences of his youth, described in a scrap of autobiography never published during his lifetime, constitute the most significant of his formative years. All art grows out of its maker's loss, it has been said-and if that is so, Dickens's loss of his childhood was to become the world's great gain.

Dickens, who is generally considered one of the most accomplished writers in the English language, published twenty novels in his lifetime-he died in 1870-and none of them has ever gone out of print. His personal experience of harsh working conditions and a deep sympathy for the poor inform much of his writing, and more than one scholar has made a life's work out of tracing the parallels between the author's life and his fiction. The number of academic books, dissertations, monographs, and articles devoted to Dickens and such lengthy works as *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*, is, practically speaking, beyond counting.

But perhaps the best known and certainly the most beloved of all Dickens's works has received relatively little study. Though *A Christmas Carol* abounds in references to Dickens's life, and is the very apotheosis of his themes-and though it is exquisitely crafted,

often referred to as his most "perfect" work—critical attention has been scant.

Perhaps it is because the book is short, fewer than 30,000 words; perhaps it is because of its very popularity, its readership said at the turn of the twentieth century to be second only to the Bible's; or perhaps it is because of the difficulty or the irrelevance of analyzing what is simply very good. Dickens's contemporary, William Makepeace Thackeray, as scathing a critic as ever walked the streets of London, once said of it, "Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it, a personal kindness."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the story behind this well-known story, however, is the pivotal role it played both in Dickens's career and in cultural history itself. At the time he sat down to write his "slender volume," Dickens's once unequalled popularity was at a nadir, his critical reputation in a shambles, his bank account overdrawn.

Faced with bankruptcy, he was contemplating giving up on writing fiction altogether. Instead, he pulled himself together and, in six short weeks, wrote a book that not only restored him in the eyes of the public but began the transformation of what was then a second-tier holiday into the most significant celebration of the Christian calendar.

However, as many an old storyteller has put it, we have gotten a bit ahead of ourselves. Mean Season

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On the evening of October 5, 1843, thirty-one-year-old Charles Dickens sat on a stage in the smoke-laden city of Manchester, surely unaware that on this evening a process would begin that would change his life—and Western culture—forever. At the moment he was simply trying to pay attention as fellow novelist and junior member of Parliament Benjamin Disraeli completed his remarks to their eager audience.

Dickens and Disraeli, along with political firebrand Richard Cobden, were the featured speakers for this special program, a fund-raiser for the Manchester Athenaeum, the industrial capital's primary beacon of arts and enlightenment. Designed by Charles Berg, architect of the Houses of Parliament, the Athenaeum's headquarters (as well as its mission) was greatly revered by culture-starved workingmen and the more progressive of the city's leaders. But a lingering downturn in the nation's economy—part of the industrial revolution's ceaseless cycle of boom and bust—had sent the Athenaeum into serious debt and placed its future in doubt.

Hoping to turn the tide, Cobden, a Manchester alderman and also an MP, had joined with other concerned citizens to lay plans for a bazaar and "grand soirée" in the adjoining Free Trade Hall. A popular and vociferous opponent of the onerous Corn Laws, which imposed stiff duties on imported grain and inflated the profits of England's landowners at the expense of a citizenry often unable to buy bread, Cobden could always be counted upon to draw an audience. But with the addition of popular authors Disraeli and Dickens to the

bill, the promoters hoped for a bonanza of shopping and new subscriptions that would secure the future of the Athenaeum once and for all.

Disraeli—the man who would go on to serve nearly forty years in his nation's government, including two stints as prime minister, propelling his country into such epic undertakings as the annexation of Cyprus and the building of the Suez Canal—was at that time simply the socially conscious son of Jewish parents, a budding politician who had left the study of law to write a series of popular romances.

The evening's headliner, however, was Dickens, who had become perhaps the world's first true celebrity of the popular arts. The author of *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* was far and away his country's best-selling author, acclaimed as much for his themes—the passionate portrayals of the misery of the poor and the presumption and posturing of the rich—as for his spellbinding powers as a storyteller. And yet, for all his accomplishments, Dickens sat upon that Manchester stage a troubled man. True, he had risen from a poverty-stricken childhood of his own to enjoy unimaginable success and influence. But what preoccupied him on that evening was how rapidly—and how unaccountably—his good fortune had fled. In fact, an account of Dickens's rise from his miserable days in a London boot-blackening factory up until the time of his appearance in Manchester reads like melodrama:

His education was first interrupted at the age of twelve, when his father—a naval pay clerk who always struggled to meet his obligations—was imprisoned for debt (in time, the rest of the family, including Dickens's mother, Elizabeth, and his three younger brothers and sisters finally joined his father in Marshalsea). Though he was able to resume school briefly after his father was released, the family's fortunes plunged again, and at fifteen, young Charles was taken from school and apprenticed as a law clerk. Though he found the work there only slightly less dismal than the bottling of boot polish—and though he quickly came to loathe the hypocrisy of a labyrinthine and self-serving legal system—he formed a lifelong commitment to the distinction between "justice" and "the law."

In 1829, at the age of seventeen, Dickens took a job as a court stenographer, and five years later, at twenty-two, began writing for a British newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*, which dispatched him across the country to cover various elections. Along the way, Dickens discovered an interest in and facility for writing of the foibles, eccentricities, and tragedies embedded in the nation's legal and political machinations; his keen eye and caustic wit enabled him to place a number of pieces in periodicals, a practice that not only supplemented his income but gratified his ego as well.

Of his first publication, a sketch titled "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," in the December 1833 issue of *Monthly Magazine*, Dickens recalls the purchase of "my first copy of the magazine in which my first effusion—dropped stealthily one evening at twilight, with fear and trembling, into a dark letter-box, in a dark office, up a court in Fleet Street—appeared in all the glory of print: on which occasion by-the-bye,—how well I recollect it!—I walked down to Westminster Hall, and turned into it for half-an-hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride, that they could not bear the street, and were not fit to be seen there."

While many of his first "outside" publications took the form of rudimentary short stories, Dickens began to make a name for himself with his nonfiction work for the Chronicle, especially the series of "Street Sketches" that offered readers for the first time a vivid and empathetic view of ordinary London life. Pieces such as "Brokers and Marine Store Shops," "The Old Bailey," and "Shabby-Genteel People," not only fascinated the readers of Dickens's time but foreshadowed the dramatic style of today's so-called new journalism. As the critic Michael Slater notes, "Already in these sketches Dickens is experimenting, very effectively, with that blending of the wildly comic and the intensely pathetic that was to win and keep him such thousands of devoted readers in after years."

This success in the Morning Chronicle led its publisher, George Hogarth, to invite Dickens to fashion a similar piece for the launch of a new publication, the Evening Chronicle. Soon Dickens was contributing regularly to the new publication and others, signing off as "Boz," and creating something of a stir in London literary circles. In October of 1835, the publisher John Macrone offered Dickens one hundred pounds for the rights to publish a collection of Sketches by Boz, a handsome sum for a young reporter making just seven pounds per week.

Writers' use of pseudonyms for the publication of literary items was a standard affectation of the time, and more than a small amount of gossip arose among those "in the know" as to the true identity of such widely read figures as Fitzboodle, Titmarsh, and Mr. C. J. Yellowplush. Dickens was fond of passing along to friends the contents of a hush-hush note he had received informing him in no uncertain terms that the writer behind the moniker of "Boz" was none other than his friend and fellow essayist Leigh Hunt.

It was not until advertisements for Sketches were placed that the true identity of "Boz" (taken from a childhood nickname for Dickens's youngest brother, Augustus) was revealed, and for several years afterward, Dickens maintained the good-natured and popular affectation. Friends called him Boz, and Dickens often referred to himself in the third person as Boz. (Later he would be featured at the "Boz Ball" during a tour of the United States, and as late as 1843, his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, though acknowledging its author as Charles Dickens, still carried the notation "Edited by Boz" on its title page.)

Sketches was published in February of 1836 and met with unqualified success. Suddenly, Dickens saw himself validated as a spokesman for the underclass and an appointed foe of buffoonery, unwarranted privilege, and chicanery. One paper lauded him as "a kind of Boswell to society," and another called the sketches "a perfect picture of the morals, manners, and habits of a great portion of English Society." John Forster, who would one day become Dickens's great friend, adviser, editor, and first biographer, wrote in the *Examiner* that Dickens

#### Other Books

246 (English Classics) The Seven Poor Travellers by Charles Dickens), 1854 (Christmas Stories) : 7 (Household Words) (Christmas issue) . 7

Adelaide Anne Procter, Wilkie Collins, Eliza Lynn Linton (Christmas Carol) (English Classics) 999 (Chapter I. In The Old City Of Rochester) (the charity hospice) 6 - (Rochester), RICHARD WATTS, Esq. by his Will, dated 22 Aug 1579 founded this Charity for Six poor Travellers, who not being ROGUES, or PROCTORS, May receive gratis for one Night, Lodging, Entertainment, and Fourpence each. Esq. 1579 8 22 . 3 . 6 . 7 (The Story Of Richard Watts) (Chapter II. The Story Of Richard Watts) ' ' ' . There was not a more dissipated and reckless Chatham barracks, in the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety-nine, than Private Richard Doubledick. He associated with the dregs of every regiment; he was as seldom sober as he could be, and was constantly under punishment. It became clear to the whole barracks that Private Richard Doubledick would very soon be flogged. 1799 . 3 (Chapter III. The Road) . While it was yet scarcely daylight, we all came out into the street together, and there shook hands. The widow took the little sailor towards Chatham, where he was to find a steamboat for Sheerness; the lawyer, with an extremely knowing look, went his own way, without committing himself by announcing his intentions; two more struck off by the cathedral and old castle for Maidstone: and the book-pedler accompanied me over the bridge. As for me, I was going to walk by Cobham Woods, as far upon my way to London as I fancied.

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02. (Father Christmas)? (The man who invented Christm  
. (Sympathiser) 04. (Andersen)  
(1987) (Westminster Abbey) 06.  
(Dickensian)! 07. (A Christmas Carol in Prose : Being a Ghost Story of Christmas)  
(1843) 08. (A Tale of Two Cities)(1859) 08-1. (Christopher Nolan)  
(The Dark Knight Rises)(2012) 08-2. (Thomas Carlyle)  
(The French Revolution)(1837) 09. . Maidstone  
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