

Letters of Charles Dickens

The work of publishing the complete letters of Charles Dickens started under the general editorship of Humphry House, assisted by his wife Madeline House, in the 1950s. The first of 12 projected volumes appeared in 1965, and the final collection of letters covering the period 1867–1870 is on course for publication by 2001. The conclusion of the series will bring to completion a unique record not only of Charles Dickens the man, but of mid-Victorian society generally.

Dr Graham Storey, *General Editor of the Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, considers some extracts from the letters which illustrate the wide range of Dickens's interests.

Dickens was a prolific letter-writer, who wrote to a vast number of correspondents. His best letters are memorable, reflecting the extraordinary range of his interests, his energy and the fusion of the serious and comic which distinguishes everything he wrote. Many letters to his closest friend, and biographer, John Forster, are a running commentary of the planning and writing of his novels; and these are almost all published in Forster's *Life of Dickens*. But there are other extremely interesting letters to other friends, previously unpublished, which throw light on his writing. Here he is, in 1849, defending the eerie atmosphere of his Christmas story, *The Haunted Man*, to his friend the Earl of Carlisle: 'As the initiator of this sort of story, I may be allowed to plead that I think a little dreaminess and vagueness essential to its effect ... but the introduction of such a quality with any of my longer books is what I never thought of in the remotest manner, and is something I contemplate with a perfect shock. If this is true, it can only be because of my having taken great pains and thought about the subject in all its lights and shades.'

'Lights and shades' permeate too the strange tragicomic ending of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens's friend, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, clearly objected to the apparent 'accidentality' of Mme Defarge's death – shot by her own revolver in the struggle with the hardly tragic Miss Pross. *Far from* an accident, writes Dickens to him: 'the whole story has in fact led up to it, so that it is, as it were, an act of divine justice.' 'I have the positive intention of making that half-comic intervention a part of the desperate woman's failure.'

There are, sadly, not many such explicit and defiant defences of his own writing aims; but letters to would-be contributors to his periodicals, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, are a goldmine for what they imply. Here is one: 'It is not enough to tell that India is misgoverned in this respect or that (which everybody knows), but the

aim of such pages is to shew a striking instance as a play might shew it.' And another, very similar: 'It is not enough to say that your characters were this or that. They must shew it for themselves, and have it in *their grain*. Then, they would act on one another, and would act for themselves whether the author liked it or no.'

The references there to acting are all-important to Dickens. He believed fervently in the stage; he created his own company of actors, performing for charity, playing the main roles himself and inspiring his company as manager; he intensely admired W.C. Macready, the leading actor of the day – and, after Macready's retirement, gave much of that admiration to the French actor, Charles Fechter. His numerous friends included many of the leading actors and actresses. His own 'readings' (both for charity 1853-58, and professional 1858-65) were essentially dramatic. He enjoyed his power over his audiences too, particularly after his reading of Sikes's murder of Nancy, in January 1869: 'At Clifton we had a contagion of fainting. I should think a dozen to 20 ladies borne out, stiff and rigid, at various times.' There is no doubt of his *pride* in that. 'I do not know if I have ever told you seriously' he wrote to Forster in 1845, 'but I have often thought, that I should have been as successful on the boards as between them.' There are numerous letters showing the energy he put into all the details of management; and more on the success of his readings, including his tour in America (November 1867–April 1868).

Other important groups of letters illustrate the impressive range of his interests and the passion he invested in them ('I do nothing by halves', he said, with absolute truth): the exploitation of young children, particularly in mines and factories; the appalling lack of sanitation in the London slums, a main cause of cholera; the tragedies that lay behind the lives of 'fallen women', leading to Urania Cottage, the Home for Fallen Women in

In 1984 the Academy formally adopted the *Letters of Charles Dickens* project under the Chairmanship of Professor Kathleen Tillotson.

Shepherd's Bush, North London, set up by the philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts in November 1847 and managed largely by Dickens. The long series of letters the Home and its residents gave rise to – sharply observed, realistic, comic and at the same time compassionate – have many of the characteristics of the novelist. At times, indeed, it is difficult to be sure whether a given passage is from a novel or a letter. Here is one: 'In a broken down gallery, at the back of a row of wooden houses like horrible old packing-cases full of fever for a countless number of years, there was a wan child looking over at a starved old white horse, who was making a meal of oyster shells. The sun was going down and flaring out like an angry fire at the child – and the child, and I, and the pale horse stared at one another in silence for some 5 minutes, as if we were so many figures in a dismal allegory ... God knows when anybody will go to the child, but I suppose it's looking over still – with a little wiry head of hair, as pale as the horse, all sticking up on its head – and an old weasel face – and two bony hands holding on to the rail of the gallery, with little fingers like convulsed skewers.' That might well be a picture of an East End London slum from *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*. In fact it is from a letter to Miss Coutts. It emphasizes how much there is in common between the imaginative sources of the novels and the imaginative sources of the letters.

What fused the two was what he constantly referred to as 'an object'. That may sound – for a writer who acclaimed the power of the imagination and his allegiance to it – as somewhat narrow and over-pragmatic. But it was, for Dickens, a phrase infinitely expandable: something nearer to what Kafka had in mind when he said: 'the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune ... a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea' (an image Dickens would certainly have appreciated). A letter of December 1852, written while he was writing *Bleak House*, is the most passionate statement we have from Dickens of a writer's responsibility. It is to the daughter of his old friend, the Judge, Lord Denman, who had accused him of condoning slavery in his comic portrait of Mrs Jellyby and what Dickens called his '4 words' critical of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: 'Pray do not, therefore, be induced to suppose that I ever write merely to abuse, or *without an object*. I wish I were as clear of every offence before Heaven, as I am of that. I may try to insinuate it into people's hearts sometimes, in preference to knocking them down and breaking their heads with it ... but I always have it. Without it, my pursuit – and the steadiness, patience, seclusion, regularity, hard work and self-concentration, it demands – would be utterly worthless to me. *I should die at the oar*, and could die a more contemptible and worthless death in no man's eyes than in my own.'