

Charles Dickens
By Michael Slater

Published by Yale University Press (November 2009)

Shortly after Dickens and his family returned from Broadstairs he travelled to Manchester to speak at the 'First Annual *Soirée*' of the Athenaeum on 5 October. The Manchester Athenaeum, founded in 1835 to provide educational and recreational facilities, including a library, for the working classes, was in financial difficulties as a result of the trade depression of the early 1840s, and Fanny Burnett had persuaded her famous brother to come and support the institution by speaking at the *Soirée*.

Dickens shared the platform with two notable M.P.s, Benjamin Disraeli and the doughty anti-Corn Law campaigner Richard Cobden. In his well-crafted address Dickens spoke of how his heart 'died within him' when he saw in jails and night-refuges 'thousands of immortal creatures condemned . . . to tread, not what our great poet calls, "the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire" but one of jagged flints and stones, laid down by brutal ignorance', and he warmly praised the Manchester Athenaeum for its strong commitment to popular education.

The idea of the State as a bad or neglectful parent to the children of the poor was central to his social thinking at this time and, shortly after his return from Manchester, the two concerns about childhood and children, the personal and the social, seem to have come together in his mind to create *A Christmas Carol*. The basic notion for this 'Ghost Story of Christmas', as he sub-titled it, derived, as has long been recognised, from a Christmas tale he wrote for *Pickwick* seven years earlier, describing the misanthropic sexton Gabriel Grub's overnight conversion to benevolence as a result of goblin intervention. Once Dickens had conceived of the more elaborate supernatural machinery of Marley's Ghost and the Christmas Spirits, and also of the definitive mean old skinflint, Ebenezer Scrooge, he had his story, to be presented as 'A Christmas Carol in Prose', divided into five staves like a real carol.

The result was the first and greatest of his five 'Christmas Books', written in a white heat of excitement during the month or so following the completion of *Chuzzlewit* XII. Dickens told Felton he had 'wept, and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner, in the composition', walking about 'the black streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles, many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed'. The result more than justified his having deferred until the end of the year his projected 'Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child'. No pamphlet, no matter how fiercely written, could have had half the impact of the pathetic figure of Tiny Tim, or of those wolf-children with whom the Ghost of Christmas Present confronts Scrooge. As to its relationship with the full-length novel Dickens was in the midst of writing, the *Carol* becomes, as Peter Ackroyd has pointed out, 'almost a dream reworking of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in which the themes of "Selfishness", money, greed and the commercialised society which results from them, are conveyed in condensed and

fantastic form'. He might have added, too, the theme of moral conversion, or change of heart, and, indeed, it is in *Chuzzlewit* XIII (chs 33–35), written immediately after the *Carol*, that Dickens describes Young Martin's sudden conversion, in the dismal swamp of Eden, from the careless selfishness that has hitherto been his dominant characteristic.

The *Carol* also shows a notable development in the consciously autobiographical element in Dickens's writing. The story actually *turns* on memory, specifically on the deleterious consequences of blanking out one's past, as he himself had perhaps often fantasised about doing. Scrooge, made literally to revisit his past, weeps to see his 'poor forgotten self as he had used to be'. In a passage that looks forward to *Copperfield*, the abandoned child Scrooge in his bleak schoolroom derives comfort and companionship from the marvellous figures his fancy conjures up from his reading of *The Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

As a writer Dickens cannot yet, it seems, directly confront the blacking factory itself, but he nevertheless comes closer here to the factual truth of his boyhood sufferings than ever before. The schoolroom setting adds, moreover, a layer of irony, conscious or unconscious, because it was to a school that the boy in the blacking-factory had so yearned to be sent. To complicate matters still further, the young Scrooge's desolate and decaying schoolhouse, 'a mansion of dull red brick, with a little weather-cock-surmounted cupola, on the roof', recalls Gad's Hill Place as seen from outside. The forsaken-child image of the young Dickens sits, deprived of hope but comforted by imaginative literature, in the ruins of his own dream home.

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