Household Words

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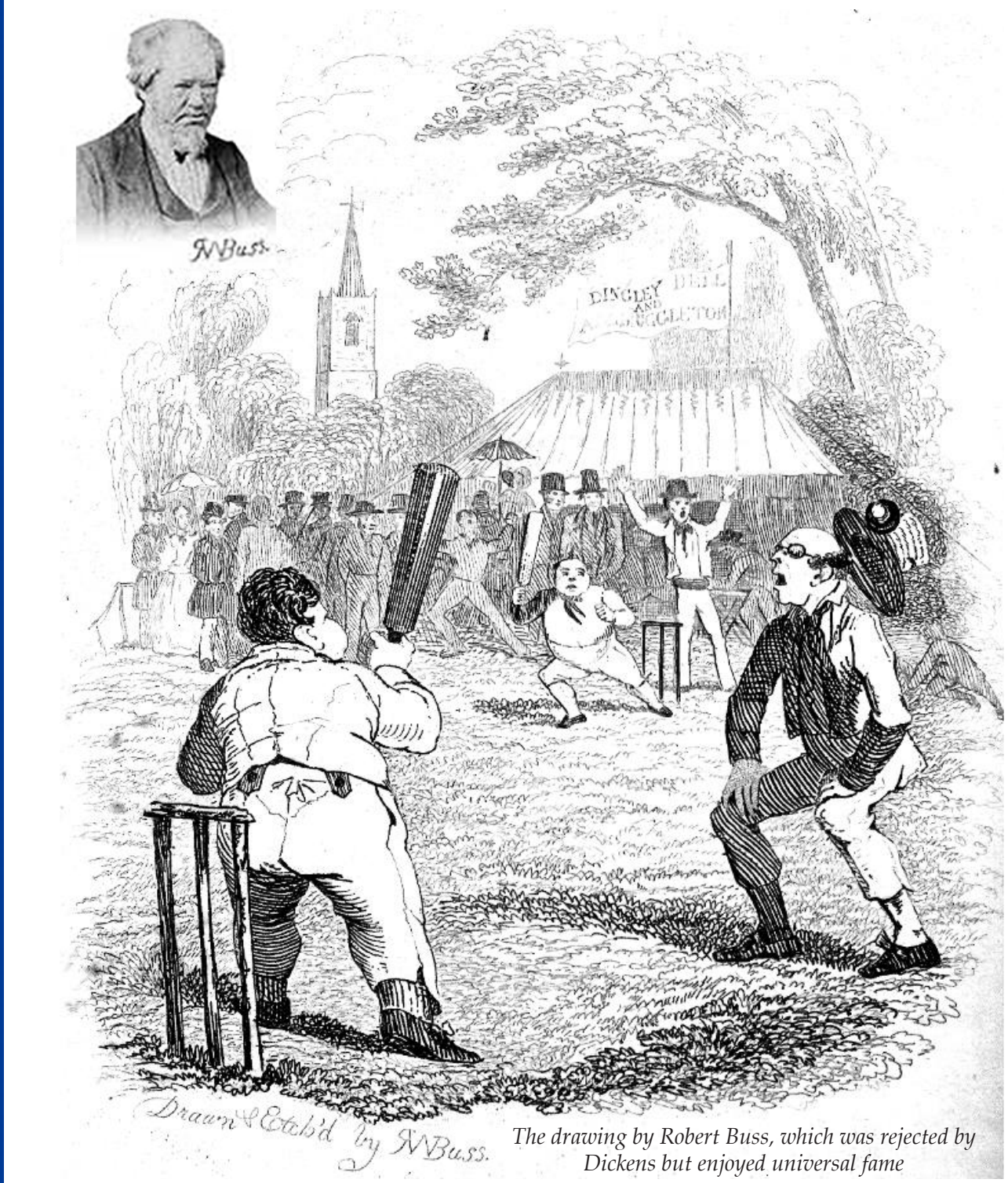

The drawing by Robert Buss, which was rejected by Dickens but enjoyed universal fame

All-Muggleton v Dingley Dell ***The Pickwick Papers*** **Our 2023 Book of the Year**

NSW Dickens Society.

w: dickenssydney.com | e: nswdickens@gmail.com

20th Anniversary

HOUSEHOLD WORDS
is the Newsletter of the
NSW DICKENS SOCIETY
Patron
Miriam Margolyes OBE

Editor
Ron Withington
ronwit@ozemail.com.au
0418 496 777

President
Sydney Cole
0432 020 670

Vice President
Walter Mason
0416 276 227

Treasurer
Rev Geoffrey Usher
02 9357 4336

Secretary/Membership
Anne Burns
0422 818 735
nswdickens@gmail.com

Events Co-ordintor
Lynn Clayton
0425 396 736

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ADDRESS OF MEETINGS
Unitarian Church
15 Francis St Darlinghurst
Meeting attendance is $5.00
cash at door per meeting

FROM OUR NEW PRESIDENT'S DESK

My name is Sydney Cole, and after a knockabout sort of earlier life, I did a teaching degree at Macquarie University. It took eight years to complete as I worked during the day and attended in the evenings. Imagine how fortunate I was when I enrolled in Victorian Literature and discovered a lecturer who inspired, not only me, but many other students. I met her again, after a break of some years in, you've guessed it, the Dickens Society. Helen Yardley is no longer able to attend, but my being here is my way of saying a deep felt Thank You to her.

I was introduced to Charles Dickens at High School. And sadly it wasn't a pleasant meeting. The books were 800 pages long and had not many pictures. However, a return to one of his books, some years later, changed my earlier opinion. I was captured. His characters now dazzled me as they came to life on the page, grotesque though many of them were.

Dickens' childhood had an enormous influence on his writing. He was brought up as the eldest child in a middle class family; his father arranged contracts for the construction of wooden ships for the Royal Navy and, although the family moved regularly between the shipbuilding towns of Southern England, Charles was well educated.

When Dickens was 12 his life changed dramatically. His father had never been good with money. He had lived beyond his means and encouraged Charles to believe he was destined for greatness. Imagine the boy's dismay when his father was gaoled in the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison in London, until such time as he paid his debts. His wife and family were able to join him there but Charles was obliged to work in an ink factory as a bottle washer with other boys whom he definitely didn't consider his social equals.

Although it lasted only a few months, the ordeal stayed with Dickens for much of his life. Only years later did he feel able to tell his biographer about it. But he did turn the episode to good use when, in *Oliver Twist*, he based the character of the Artful Dodger, a street-smart villain, and ringleader of the gang of child-robbers, on one of the boys he had worked with.

He did go back to school the following year, but memories of his visits to the prison are used in many of his stories, and the deaths of several characters occur within its walls. It's fashionable, nowadays, to dismiss his writing as melodramatic, as making excessive use of sentimentality, but 150 years ago these characters came alive for Victorian readers.

His phenomenal popularity was not confined to Britain; crowds waited at the docks in New York and Sydney in order to read the latest episode of his most recent novel. Dickens made several whistle-stop tours of America, doing public readings, and became rich doing so, such was the demand. A man who had always loved the theatrical, it is said that he could move his audiences from laughter to tears several times over the course of an evening, by simply reading his stories.

Because of the family's financial uncertainty, Dickens left school two years after his father's release and started work as a court reporter. It was here that he became the astute observer of human nature that stood him in such good stead when describing the characters who infested the streets

of London; at that time, the biggest city in the world.

His life coincided with the height of the Industrial Revolution. In ***Dombey and Son,*** streets are torn down and populations displaced as railway companies buy land and lay railroads in pursuit of money and power. It did, in fact, benefit the working class as well. For the first time ordinary people were able to travel further than walking distance from their own towns and villages.

Yet Dickens' life was a paradox. In middle-age he left his wife, the mother of his ten children, for a young actress, and yet as a writer he acted as the social conscience of a nation. At a time when boys as young as eight were sent up to clean chimneys, and many died doing it, he illustrates the feelings of his young protagonist in *Great Expectations*, to make a plea for Fairness. "In the little world in which children have their existence," he says," there is nothing so finely perceived, or so strongly felt, as injustice." This sentiment, which obviously originates in his own childhood, became a watchword for what he expressed in his writing.

In the book, *Hard Times*, he satirizes the system of charity schools where orphans were grudgingly given just enough food and education to survive, in order that they could be exploited for the rest of their (often short) lives by the unscrupulous proprietors. In *Bleak House*, the characters spend all their money and waste their lives chasing a compensation case which is delayed indefinitely by greedy lawyers and a corrupt system.

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, unscrupulous developers sell blocks of desert and marshland in the American hinterland to idealistic migrants trying to start a new life. Although he was loved in the US, Dickens was quick to point out the many shortcomings of that great nation when he saw them.

Reissues of his books are constantly published in all the English-speaking countries of the world, and many more translated, and this over 150 years after his death. There are hundreds of Dickens societies throughout the world; a particularly strong one here in Sydney which, at the end of 2018 hosted the International Dickens Conference, an annual event. A major attraction is the statue of the great man in Centennial Park; one of only three extant in the world, and only recently restored to life, having been vandalised and rediscovered headless some decades ago.

What is it then, that has enabled Charles Dickens to be remembered, when so many writers have been consigned to obscurity? His characters are larger than life, very probably; his coincidences stretch the envelope to bursting point, certainly; but his ability to mine the depths of human nature and discover gems, the beauty of which plucks at our heartstrings, is incomparable.

This is a fairly simplistic if totally sincere account of my journey thus far with Charles Dickens. But I look forward to a future of sharing with our Committee and you our members, exciting revelations of much greater fun and erudition.

Sydney Cole — President

EDITORIAL

This is my first edition of ***Household Words*** and I was drawn to investigate the origin of the title. Of course I could do no better than to ask Dickens himself, and this is what emerged:

We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers.... No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast...

Pretty challenging stuff! Then I remembered (and looked up) a bit of Henry V's speech that I once had off by heart at school — and there was the origin of the expression:

Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as HOUSEHOLD WORDS,
Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.

Pretty inspiring stuff! Shakespeare seems to have enjoyed the word 'household' and used it no less than 23 times in his plays — often referring to 'household stuff', by which he meant the Tudor equivalents of bathroom fittings and white goods.

And so to work.... Writing on Dickens is prolific and much of what you will read in this periodical will be familiar; but the aim is to try to come up with material you have not heard before or to give the old a new twist. A lot depends upon the input of you, the members. Please do send me anything you come across, from full blown articles and current events to any bits of Dickensian title-tattle.

ronwit@ozemail.com.au

The Committee is keen to re-establish the five-minute 'Show and Tell' segment in our meetings, where you can bring along an item of Dickensian resonance and tell us how you got it and what it means to you. Great fun. Please check out your walls, shelves and cupboards and give the Secretary a call.

Sadly, Christopher Cooper has had to relinquish his role as editor of ***Boz in Oz*** and for my sins that job has also fallen to me. Your contributions gladly welcomed.

Please take a good hard look on page 12 at the feast of Society activities being staged over the rest of the year and do make plans to come along: Unitarian Church, 15 Francis St, Darlinghurst, 10.00 for 10.30.

Hoping to see you there. ***Ron Withington— Ed.***

EXHIBITION WITH A TWIST

The grand Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart is currently presenting a major winter exhibition **TWIST, which should be of interest to all Dickensians.**

TWIST is the culmination of three years of development by our valued member, Dr Mary Knights, Senior Curator of Art, TMAG, who travelled to the UK with support from the Gordon Darling Foundation to undertake research on Dickens' life and literary themes. The exhibition brings together museum and library collection material and artwork to engage with Dickensian themes – with a contemporary and quirky Twist.

It features works from 24 contemporary artists, including 13 of Australian and Irish background (six of whom are Tasmanian), who have created new artworks to draw on Dickensian themes and their relevance to Van Diemen's Land, and contemporary Tasmania.

Those represented include First Nations artists, who relate the themes to the impact of colonisation. The full list of artists is Raymond Arnold & Rodney Croome, Christl Berg, Pat Brassington, Michelle Browne, Nicholas Folland, Keith Giles, Julie Gough, Fiona Hall, Ursula Halpin, Sandra Johnston, Sue Kneebone, Ricky Maynard, Mish Meijers & Tricky Walsh, Milan Milojevic, Brigita Ozolins, Effie Pryer, Yhonnie Scarce, Mary Scott, Tom Sloane, Heather B. Swann, Dominic Thorpe and Paul Zika.

If you are interested in taking a short break in Tasmania this winter, you might like to visit the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart.

TWIST is on show in TMAG's Argyle Galleries, Henry Hunter Gallery 5, Salon Gallery and Bond Store until 22 October 2023. There are tours of the exhibition at 11.00am on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays for the duration. If you are unable to get there yourself, you can look up all the labels for each artist which gives an idea of the works on display and the novels that inspired them. To find out more, Google the Twist Exhibition page. ***RW***

AND WALTER WILL BE THERE

Our esteemed Vice-President, **Walter Mason** will be speaking at **TWIST** on the evening of **Thursday 24 August 2023** following an overview of the exhibition by Senior TMAG Curator of Art, Dr Mary Knights.

In the unlikely event that you have not met Walter at one of our meetings, Mary has kindly supplied this background profile

"Our special guest Walter Mason will give a light-hearted and fascinating look at the youthful folly that marked Dickens' triumphant debut as one of England's great and celebrated writers. Walter will talk about how *The Pickwick Papers* helped set the scene for the extraordinary literary career of the most popular novelist of the Victorian era, and the unexpected delight of reading the book in the 21st century.

"Walter is the vice-president of the NSW Dickens Society, a captivating speaker, and a well-known travel writer. He regularly speaks at international festivals and conferences and gives guest lectures on literary subjects including E. F. Benson, Noel Coward and the travel writer H. V. Morton. Walter is the author of the travel memoirs 'Destination Saigon' and 'Destination Cambodia' (both published by Allen & Unwin), teaches Cambodian, Vietnamese and Buddhist history, and regularly leads tours to Vietnam. He is also a popular teacher of writing, mindfulness and creativity."

NOTE: This is being organised by the TMAG Friends so may require booking and entry fee. Mary Knights will forward the TMAG Friends flyer when they put it together.

DICKENS BOOKS ON SALE FOR CHARITY

The Dickens Society has been gifted a set of uniform Dickens' books published in the late 19th century. Some of the books have a date on the title page and others not. They're undamaged and in reasonable, but not pristine, condition. There are 23 volumes with a more recently published, smaller anthology thrown in. We'd like to offer them for sale with the proceeds going to The Children's Cancer Institute.

If you feel you'd like to own this interesting set of books by our favourite author, you can make an offer or arrange to see them by phoning me on 0432 020 670, sending an email to *sydcole1914@gmail.com* ***Syd Cole***

A GREAT AND DIRTY CITY: Dickens and the London Fog

'Fog everywhere' writes Charles Dickens in his very opening passage to *Bleak House*, describing a common experience for many Victorian Londoners.

'London Ivy', or 'pea soupers' as they were known, were heavy, dense fogs of greens, yellows, rust colours or black – even all of these colours at once. They were foul smelling and left greasy deposits all over the city. A consequence of homes and industries burning coal in a densely packed city, the London 'pea souper' grew more frequent during Dickens's lifetime as the city's population grew speedily and the Industrial Revolution took hold of the country.

A current exhibition at the Charles Dickens Museum in London peers through the London fog to explore the circumstances that created this problem and how Dickens was inspired by the phenomenon. Dickens describes the fog most famously in his novel *Bleak House* but it also creeps into his other works such as *Our Mutual Friend, A Christmas Carol*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and creates the essential elements of a dark and filthy 'Dickensian' London.

Among the items on display are a first edition of Dickens's 'foggiest' novel, *Bleak House,* an original pen and wash illustration by Frederick Barnard, who was employed by Dickens's publisher, Chapman & Hall, to illustrate the 'Household Edition' of nine of Dickens's works (1871-1879), and Dickens's own fire poker, used to tend his dining room fire while he lived at Gad's Hill.

Smoke and air pollution continued to plague London into the twentieth century, as it does today, and the exhibition also examines the London experience of air pollution in the modern city.

If you can't go to Hobart for the cultural feast of TWIST, perhaps you can make it to London. The exhibition runs until 22 October 2023. The opening hours for the Charles Dickens Museum, at 48 Doughty Street, are 10.00am to 5.00pm, Wednesday to Sunday, and the admission price is included as part of your museum visit.

Dickens Fellowship London Symposium

The Dickens Fellowship is holding a symposium to honour Emeritus Professor Michael Slater's contribution to the Fellowship and to Dickens studies more generally.

The symposium will be held in London on the afternoon before this year's Dickens Day – Friday 6 October, from 14.00 to 18.00 (Dickens Day will follow on Saturday 7 October).

It is going to be a hybrid event, so that friends, colleagues, and Fellowship branch members who cannot attend in person will be able to join us via Zoom.

The timing is not at all good for the Australian branches to participate via Zoom. The corresponding AEST will be midnight to 4.00am on Saturday 7 October! But we have been constrained by availability of rooms in Senate House and trying to accommodate UK and North American attendees.

If you happen to be in Britain or don't mind staying up late you may wish to join in. The event is free but you will need to book. We will notify people of details closer to the event.

Can you score 20/20 on this *A Christmas Carol* Quiz or are you a bit of a humbug?

1. In which year was "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens published?
2. Who was Ebenezer Scrooge's first employer?
3. What was the name of Scrooge's overworked and underpaid clerk?
4. Scrooge was visited by the spirit of which former business partner?
5. Which catchphrase is most associated with Scrooge?
6. What is the first name of Scrooge's nephew?
7. What is Belle's relationship to Ebenezer Scrooge?
8. Can you name the deceased sister of Scrooge?
9. How many ghosts does Marley say will visit Scrooge?
10. Which ghost appears to Scrooge as "a jolly giant" with dark brown curls?
11. Who is a chained and tormented spirit, doomed to wander the earth forever?
12. The Ghost of Christmas Present reveals to Scrooge two emaciated children, what were their names?
13. What does Scrooge send to Bob Cratchit's house on Christmas Day?
14. Who had died in the vision given to Scrooge by The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?
15. As promised by Marley's ghost, Scrooge is visited by the ghosts as the bell tolls what time?
16. Who was the first ghost to visit Scrooge after the visit of Marley?
17. Which ghost has 1800 brothers and a life span of one day?
18. How many years had Marley been dead for?
19. Who was the original illustrator of A Christmas Carol?
20. Which saying of Tiny Tim's is also the famous last words of the novel?

(Answers on the last page)

Notes on Christmas

As shoppers, we have become accustomed to Easter Eggs on Australia Day and Reindeer in Spring, so perhaps it is not too maladroit to have Johnny Rae from Broadstairs bring us his *Notes on Christmas* — in July. Particularly as he focuses considerable attention on aspects of our Book of the Year, *The Pickwick Papers*. RW

Britain was still making its way out of the little ice age by the time Charles Dickens was starting to write in the 1830s. The last significant freezing over of the Thames occurred in 1814 (one of the coldest winters on record) two years after Dickens's birth in Portsmouth. Agriculturally, industrially and socially the challenges and implications of extended periods of severe freezing temperatures, snow, ice and flooding can barely be understood in the modern age. But contemporary reports in diaries and newspapers of the period tell a grim story of perpetual struggle for life and livelihood in the cities, towns and rural margins. The winter of 1836/37 saw huge waves of snowfall around the country, with severe icy conditions lasting many months into the new year.

By the second half of 1836 rapid growth in the popularity of *The Pickwick Papers* had propelled Charles Dickens (Boz) to an intoxicating level of literary fame. Energetic and impatient from the beginning of his career Dickens was to set an extraordinary work rate, up against deadlines, often writing across many different projects at the same time, coupled with his constant and often lengthy holidays around the south east of England, primarily Kent. Dickens was constantly on the move in one way or another.

Biographer Peter Ackroyd suggests that 'Dickens's imagination caught fire as he went along ... the energy and speed making it burn all the brighter.' This line refers ostensibly to the creative forces behind *The Pickwick Papers* but serves equally well to illustrate how Dickens's journeys around the country also invigorated his writing. As a journalist he instinctively peppered the novel with 'obliquities and passing references', everything very 'up to the minute'. In the summer of 1837 he will base himself at Broadstairs for the first time, unplanned but serendipitously making this cliff edge town a central place of homage for Dickens fans to this very day.

'He wrote so quickly, so freely, with so little sense of formality that he picked up material wherever he could find it.' A few summers later local Broadstairs resident Mary Pearson Strong will be immortalized as Betsey Trotwood, and the Steerforth storm (allegedly based on a real storm in Viking Bay) will both find their way into the novel *David Copperfield*.

Referring to the 1836 publishing phenomenon of *The Pickwick Papers* and its 'sense of moving life' that appealed so much to the reading public, Ackroyd writes 'Within a few weeks (Dickens) had started to tie the month of the fictional narrative to the very month in which that number would appear....by the conclusion of his labour he had so harnessed the time of his narrative to the real time of chronology, and had been so successful at relating the impact of brief stories and events to a larger movement of each episode, that in the PP he came close to incorporating the rhythm of life itself.'

The 1836 December edition of Pickwick allowed Dickens to indulge his readers with scenes that had no impact on the plot whatsoever. It's the jubilant return to Dingley Dell, and Christmas at Manor Farm. Far from being what readers would grow to recognise in Dickens's works as 'the unnecessary detail' or 'complex background of character' these chapters are intended just for fun during the festive season. Old friends and faces are reunited in a cosy, warm rural celebration of 'old' Christmas and there's a wedding as well.

At Manor Farm the partygoers feast, drink, and play traditional games such as Bindman's Buff and cards. At some point the ever generous Mr Pickwick salutes the bride and places a gold watch and chain around her neck. There is the passing around of 'the mystic branch' mistletoe, a free-for-all of kisses, and much wassailing. Wardle calls all the servants in to partake of wine and toasts. The large sitting room is a scene of festive cheer. 'Seated in a shady bower of holly and evergreens, were the two best fiddlers, and the only harp, in all Muggleton.' A sentence that sounds like something from the pages of *The Hobbit*. This cosy, feudal, dreamlike chapter is very close to fairytale.

J.B. Priestley described this kind of Dickens world as 'somewhere between Early Victorian England and Elfland'. Lewis Carroll described Dickens's characters as garden gnomes. These observations

apply to most of his novels but especially to the many characters and scenes in Pickwick.'The carpet was up, the candles burnt bright, the fire blazed and crackled on the hearth, and merry voices and light-hearted laughter rang through the room'. To further blur the magical drowsy line between ancient times and Elfland, Dickens writes 'If any old English yeomen had turned into fairies when they died, it was just the place in which they would have held their revels'. George Orwell was less inclined to join the party, 'from Dickens's point of view 'good society', is simply a collection of village idiots' an age of 'enormous families, pretentious meals, and inconvenient houses...*The Pickwick Papers* is not a story at all, merely a series of sketches, there is little attempt at development — the characters simply go on behaving like idiots, in a kind of eternity'. All of which is perfectly true, I suppose.

Dickens's narrator gushes 'happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days'. Significantly the Dingley Dell chapters also contain an interpolated tale, *The Story of the Goblins Who Stole A Sexton.* This moral ghost story featuring the misanthropic gravedigger Gabriel Grubb is set on Christmas Eve. The goblins would return again in *The Chimes* (1844) along with the pairing of Christmas with a wedding (a much more austere working class affair, (on New Year's Day) but this early fairytale is clearly identifiable as the basis for what would later become *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Orwell was writing his essay on Dickens in the turbulent mid twentieth century, a time of world wars, general strikes, and gritty working class novels, so his reluctance to celebrate the 'turkeys for all' moral message in these tales is probably understandable. But the two writers are separated only by time, for both surely share the most obvious literary legacy, the era-defining allegorical novel. In Orwell's 1984 the cautionary tale is set in a perilously near future, a grey and soulless, eternally reiterated dystopia, where the middle class (or Party) lead android lives under constant observation while the prols on the margins of society find solace in their 'cheesy beer'. In *A Christmas Carol*, set, as always with Dickens-land, somewhere in the perilously

near past, Scrooge represents the middling classes, men of money and ceaseless trade shuffling around in the dark, claustrophobic and rotting urban centres. On the margins a disenfranchised poor try to eke out an existence, struggling to honour old holiday traditions, grabbing any traces of charity and fellow-feeling along the way. Peter Ackroyd describes this modern fairytale as a 'curious blend of religious mysticism and popular superstition ... the Christmas of Dickens resembles the more ancient festival celebrated in rural areas and the north of England'. Folk customs which the campaigning regency journalist William Hone was lamenting the loss of in the pages of *The Everyday Book* ,an 1820's miscellany, 'the few that remain are rapidly declining...without such feelings, the few occasions which enable us to show a hospitable disposition, or from whence we can obtain unconstrained cheerfulness, will pass away, and be remembered only as having been'. Hone reprints passages from *The Literary Pocket Book*, 'the middle classes make it a sorry business of a pudding or so extra, and a game at cards'. Around the country and especially in the cities and towns the spaces where the crowd used to congregate for fairs and festivals are now withering away in the face of middle class intransigence and simmering disgust, 'proud distances and formal doings-out'. Dickens's Christmas stories blended fantasy with moral message in an age and at a time when his audience seemed most willing to read and receive it. By taking a break from the arduous task of monthly serialisation in 1843 Dickens reached out through the pages of *A Christmas Carol* and forged a new and more intimate link with his readers. Christmas would never be quite the same again. Ackroyd suggests 'he made it cosy...comfortable, and he achieved this by exaggerating the darkness beyond the small circle of light'.

In one scene the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to an open country road on a clear, cold winter day, with snow on the ground. They are on the margins of his childhood home.

'You recollect the way? enquired the Spirit. 'Remember it!' cried Scrooge with fervour; 'I could walk it blindfold'. 'Strange to have forgotten it for so many years!' observed the Ghost. ***Johnny Rae***

Killing Dickens

Contemporary novelist, Zadie Smith, provides a fascinating exploration of the pervasive influence the life and writings of Charles Dickens has on an English writer born in London. So strong that she found herself setting out to finish him off.....

For the first thirty years of my life, I lived within a one-mile radius of Willesden Green Tube Station. It's true I went to college — I even moved to East London for a bit. Then suddenly, quite abruptly, I left not just the city but England itself. First for Rome, then Boston, and then my beloved New York, where I stayed ten years. When friends asked why I'd left the country, I'd sometimes answer with a joke: Because I don't want to write a historical novel. Perhaps it was an in-joke: only other English novelists really understood what I meant by it. I myself had married an Irish poet who liked travel and adventure and had left the island of his birth at the age of eighteen. My ties to England seemed to be evaporating. I would not say I was entirely tired of London. But I was definitely weary of London's claustrophobic literary world, or at least the role I had been assigned within it: multicultural (aging) wunderkind. Off I went. Like many expats, we thought about returning. Lots of factors kept us abroad. Still, periodically, we would give in to fits of regret and nostalgia, two writers worrying away at the idea that they had travelled too far from the source of their writings. After all, a writer can be deracinated to death. . . . Sometimes, to make ourselves feel better, we'd make the opposite case. Take Irish writers — we'd say to ourselves — take Beckett and Joyce. Didn't they write about home while living many miles away from it? Then the doubt would creep back in again.

Throughout all this equivocation, I kept clinging to the one piece of data about which I felt certain: any writer who lives in England for any length of time will sooner or later find herself writing a historical novel, whether she wants to or not. Why is that? Sometimes I think it's because our nostalgia loop is so small—so tight. There are, for example, people in England right now who can bring themselves to Proustian tears at the memory of the Spice Girls or MiniDiscs or phone boxes — it doesn't take much — and this must all have an effect on our literary culture. The French tend to take the term *nouveau roman* literally. Meanwhile, the English seem to me constitutionally mesmerized by the past. Even *Middlemarch* is a historical novel! And though plenty English myself, I retained a prejudice against the form, dating back to student days, when we were inclined to think of historical novels as aesthetically and politically conservative by definition.

If you pick up a novel and find that it could have been written at any time in the past hundred years, well, then, that novel is not quite doing its self-described job, is it? Surely, it's in the very DNA of the novel to be new? So I have always thought. But, over time, the specious logic of these student arguments has come under some pressure, specifically after I read several striking examples of the genre. You can come at the past from an interrogative angle, or a sly remove, and some historical fiction will radically transform your perspective not just on the past but on the present. These ideas are of course obvious to long-term fans of historical fiction, but they were new to me.

Around 2012 I stumbled upon a story from the nineteenth century that I knew at once had my name all over it. It concerned a court battle of 1873 — among the longest in British history — in which Arthur Orton, a butcher from Wapping, claimed to be Sir Roger Tichborne, the long-missing, presumed-drowned heir to the Doughty-Tichborne estate.

The plight of the Tichborne Claimant, as he came to be known, was a cause célèbre of its day, not least because the Claimant's star witness and stoutest defender turned out to be a Jamaican ex-slave called Andrew Bogle, who had worked for the Tichbornes and insisted that he recognized Sir Roger. Now, one might imagine that the court testimony of a poor black man in 1873 would be met with widespread skepticism, but the British Public is full of surprises, and having seen so many working-class defendants mistreated by bourgeois juries, Etonian lawyers, and aristocratic judges, the people were more than ready to support a poor man's claim to be a rich one. Huge crowds filled the courtroom, eager to see one of their own win, for once. Bogle and his butcher became national heroes. This extraordinary story struck me like a found art object: perfect for my purposes. But it was eight years before I finally sat down at my desk to unwrap it.

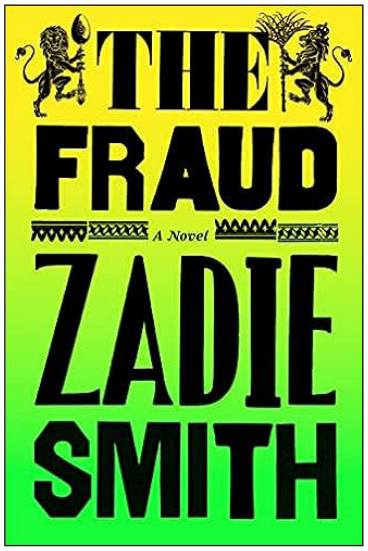
Over the years I did everything I could to avoid

Zadie Smith was born in north-west London in 1975. She is the author of the novels *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW and Swing Time*, as well as *The Embassy of Cambodia* and the essay collection, *Changing My Mind*. She is also the editor of *The Book of Other People*, is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and has twice been listed as one of Granta's 20 Best Young British Novelists.
She has won the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Guardian First Book Award among many others, and been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction.

writing my historical novel. I stayed in America, far from British libraries and court transcripts. We had another child. I wrote four more books. But, through it all, I continued to lurk around the subject in a casual way, like a nervous woman on a dating app, never quite swiping right. I would read a few history books, get anxious, put the idea back in the drawer. I still did not want to write a historical novel. I feared the amount of work involved.

Generally speaking, I don't make notes. I sit down. I write a novel. But already this non-novel that I was refusing to write had generated a drawer full of notes and a shelf of books. I said to myself: my studying days are over. I said to myself: if you let this happen it will play to your worst, your most long-winded, your most Dickensian instincts. Already every Tichborne thread I pulled seemed to lead to yet another rich tapestry of nineteenth-century life, one that required yet more books to be ordered, and another folder of notes to be made. I was already profoundly boring the members of my household: "Did you know that in 1848 . . . " I said to myself: Zadie, your novels are long enough when they're about nothing! What's going to happen when actual facts are involved? Walk away, Smith, walk away!

Hanging over all this anxiety was the long shadow of Dickens. To be my age, bookish, and born in England was to grow up under that tiresomely gigantic influence. Dickens was everywhere. He was in school and on the shelves at home and in the library. He invented Christmas. He was in politics, influencing changes in labor law, educational law, even copyright law. He was the original working-class hero — radiant symbol of our supposed meritocracy — as well as a crown jewel of the English Heritage tourist industry. (In other words, he was posthumously manipulated by many different sections of British society to score a variety of political points.) He was also everywhere I wanted to be: in the theatre, in Italy, in America. Televised versions of his books were on rotation — there is a case to be made that Dickens is the reason that we have prestige-TV miniseries in the first place — and he was in the goddam Muppets and all over Hollywood, in conscious adaptation and unconscious theft. I personally read far too much of him as a child, and though I grew up to have all the usual doubts and caveats about him — too sentimental, too theatrical, too moralistic, too controlling — I was also never able to quite get out from under his embarrassing influence, as much as I've often wanted to. So it went with my surreptitious research. No matter where I found myself in nineteenth-century London, I'd run into Dickens. In the main chapters, in the index, in parentheses or out of them — all roads led back to Charles. There didn't seem to be a nineteenth-century pot he didn't have his finger in. I could be minding my own business reading about, say, an uprising in Jamaica, and suddenly there he was again, signing a petition on the matter. I'd be reading about a long-dead, long-forgotten writer, William Harrison Ainsworth — a resident of my neighborhood — and there Dickens would be, befriending him. I'd read a book about American slavery and discover him in the footnotes! At which point I'd find myself saying, Oh, hi, Charles, like an actual crazy person. Then lockdown arrived, and like everyone else I went a little crazy. I grew increasingly interested in William's housekeeper, a woman called Eliza Touchet. I became obsessed with the plantation on which Andrew Bogle had been enslaved — the Hope Estate — and the long, brutal entanglement between England and Jamaica. I read several books about the Tichborne Claimant and thought a lot about fraud: fake identities, fake news, fake relationships, fake histories. When I tried to explain to anyone what all these subjects had in common, I did not sound like a person writing a historical novel as much as a person who had entirely lost the plot. Or perhaps: who had rediscovered plot. I called my novel ***The Fraud***. And then, in May, 2020, just as I finally put finger to keyboard, we moved back to England, in time to join the British lockdown.



Released 12 Sept 2023

With nothing to do and nowhere to go, I took my regulation walk through the streets like my fellow-Britons, but with the small difference that my eyes always remained above shop level: trained upward to the eaves and the cornices and the chimneys. Toward the nineteenth century, in other words, which is everywhere in North West London, once you start looking. I began haunting the local graveyards. I found William Ainsworth's grave and Eliza Touchet's grave, and could point on a map to the unmarked pauper's grave of the Tichborne Claimant, as well as the corner of King's Cross where Bogle breathed his last. It was 2020 outside but 1870 in my head. I had effectively completely conceded: I was back in England and I was writing an historical novel. My pride rested now on one principle: no Dickens. This meant — at the very least—no orphans, no lengthy Dickensian descriptions, and absolutely no mean women called Mrs. Spitely or

continued overleaf

The Fraud —continued from page 9

cowards called Mr Fearfaint, or what have you. To insure this, I was careful to reread no Dickens, and, aside from his frequent appearances in my research materials, I tried my best to put the man out of my mind. But one of the lessons of writing fiction is that truth is stranger than it. The fact that a real person I was writing about was called Eliza Touchet — and that this same woman was beginning to bloom in my mind, until she dwarfed all the other characters — meant that I now had to face the prospect of my novel strongly featuring a woman whose name even Dickens would have considered a bit too on the nose. Touché, Mrs Touchet! But that wasn't even the last joke Dickens had to play on me, from beyond the grave.

About halfway through my research, his name started leaping up out of the footnotes and into the main body of the text, as a real-life actor in the events I was concerned with, and it became clear to me that in order to tell the whole of my true story there was really no way to entirely avoid Mr Charles Dickens making an actual appearance in my actual pages. For several years, he was a regular dinner guest of Ainsworth's. He was involved in a debate about the future of Jamaica. (On the wrong side of the debate.) Most mind-bogglingly, Doughty Street — where Dickens once lived — is in that corner of South East Bloomsbury which belongs to the Doughty-Tichborne estate. Which meant that Dickens's former home was a piece of what my Claimant was trying to claim. Dickens was everywhere, like weather.

Sometimes, in writing, you have to give up control, take a Zen attitude, and go where you're being led, which is often right back to where you came from. So I said to Mr Dickens: Look. You can have a walk-on part, but then I am killing you in the following chapter, straightaway. You won't be hanging around and you won't be making any witty speeches or imparting any wisdom. I was as good as my word, killing him in a paragraph, in a very brief, un-Dickensian chapter titled 'Dickens Is Dead!' Immediately, I felt that sense of catharsis which people often believe writing brings but which I myself have experienced only rarely. Look at me! (I said to myself.) I just killed Dickens! (By describing his sudden death and burial at Westminster Abbey.) But, not long after I wrote that triumphant scene, for practical reasons (a flashback) Charles made his inevitable return, appearing as a younger and even more irrepressible force than he had been forty pages earlier. At that point, I gave up. I let him pervade my pages, in the same way he stalks through nineteenth-century London. He's there in the air and the comedy and the tragedy and the politics and the literature. He's there where he had no business being (for example, in debates about the future of Jamaica). He's there as a sometimes oppressive, sometimes irresistible, sometimes delightful, sometimes overcontrolling influence, just as he was in life. Just as he has always been in my life. But childhood influences are like that. They drive you crazy precisely because your debt to them is far larger than you want to know or care to admit.

Eleven years later, at the very end of the long gestation and writing period of my historical novel, I closed my laptop and said to myself: I know he often infuriates you, but the truth is you never could have written this without him. With this debt in mind, then, I decided to do something I have avoided doing all my London life: I made a pilgrimage to Westminster Abbey. Walked around the back to Poets' Corner and stood right on Charles Dickens's grave. Oh, hi, Charles. Feeling my debt, but also hoping that it was paid in full, at long last. And when I got back home, completely finished with the unavoidable Mr Dickens and his influence and wanting to do something that required no reading and no notes and no research at all — something like watching a bit of telly — I turned on the good old BBC, and what was on the menu? A new *Great Expectations*. A 'color-blind' version, sure, but still *Great Expectations.* Oh, hi, Charles. Hello and goodbye and hello again.

Zadie Smith, condensed from The New Yarker, 2023

Dickens Newsfront

Demon Copperhead, by Barbara Kingsolver (2022), a re-imagining of *David Copperfield* which is set in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States in the late 1990s, is one of four titles in the running for the fiction section of the ultra prestigious James Tait Black Prizes. *Copperhead* has already won The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2023, the Women's Prize for Fiction 2023, and is an Oprah Book Club pick!

Christopher Eccleston will take to the stage in the leading role in Matthew Warchus' adaption of *A Christmas Carol,* written by Jack Thorne, when it returns to the Old Vic later this year.
The *Doctor Who* actor said he felt 'very lucky' to portray Ebeneezer Scrooge in the stage production, which will play for the seventh time at the Old Vic from 11 November 2023 to 6 January 2024.

Actor-comedian **Eddie Izzard** has just completed an outstanding one-woman, six-week show at the Garrick Theatre playing 19 characters in a retelling of *Great Expectations.* A challenge for our Patron!?

BOOK REVIEW: *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* by A N Wilson

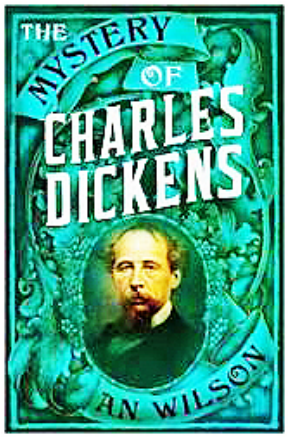
Andrew Wilson is a prolific writer, especially of the Victorian period. Each chapter of the book addresses a different enigma of Dickens' life, and the part I'm going to quote from is that in which Wilson attempts to explain how Dickens transformed the disappointing experiences of his early life into the priceless literature he created.

In an article written in *Household Words*, Dickens made the point that pantomime was a world: "where a man may tumble into the broken ice, or dive into the kitchen fire, and only be the more droll for the accident; where babies may be knocked about or sat upon, or choked with gravy spoons in the process of feeding, and yet no coroner be wanted, nor anybody be made uncomfortable. I suspect this to be the secret (though they may not present it to themselves) of the general enjoyment which an audience of vulnerable spectators, themselves liable to pain and sorrow, find in this class of entertainment."

In this way, by transforming the more unpleasant aspects of life, particularly his own, into a form of pantomime that people could laugh at, Dickens made himself immortal. Wilson asserts that Pantomime, more than serious drama, was the template for Dicken's fiction in the earlier half of his writing life.

He goes on to say: "Dickens did not blame his father for the childhood traumas. It was the mother who bore all the weight of that cruel story. John Dickens remained, for the novelist, the jolly, jokey figure with whom, in early childhood, Charles had enjoyed ramblings in the marsh country along the Medway, and who, in the squalid houses where they lodged, and from whose rent-collectors they flitted, kept him amused with recitations, imitations and jokes."

As we know, there are countless examples of sub-standard parenting in all Dickens' novels but many are transmogrified into the benign humour we all recognise. In fact, Dickens went on to make his father a figure of benign burlesque, particularly in the character of Mr Micawber, who, you'll remember, was the spendthrift character in *David Copperfield*.



The forerunner of today's pantomime was the **Harlequinade**, a mime show which featured the diamond-suited character. Generally, however, the only speaking part was that of the Clown, the star of the show and, like all the Dickensian figures who correspond to Clown, Micawber is gifted with the exhilarating power of utterance. "Now, welcome poverty!" cried Mr Micawber, shedding tears. "Welcome misery, welcome houselessness, welcome hunger, rags, tempest, beggary. Mutual confidence will sustain us to the end!"

The writer further states, "Fecklessness, idleness, the ability to put pleasure before work, are often, in his novels, desirable qualities, as exemplified by Dick Swiveller, or Mr Jingle in Pickwick, or Micawber. They are often redeemed and emigrate successfully; Jingle to the West Indies and Micawber to Australia."

I enjoyed, and highly recommend the book. There are certainly occasional contradictions in the account, but, after all I think you'll agree, nobody had more contradictions in his life than our good friend Charles Dickens?

Syd Cole

Harper Collins Soft Cover
July 2020, 368pp
Supplier Amazon

BOOK REVIEW: *Estella* by Kathy George

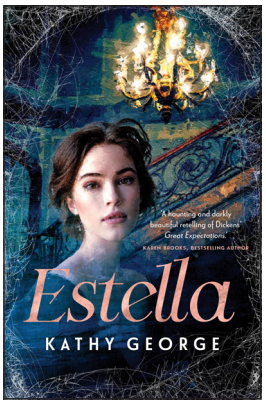
This book by Brisbane based author, Kathy George, is a retelling of *Great Expectations* from the Estella's point of view. The author wanted to create an Estella that people could warm to in spite of her cold-hearted nature. The novel aims to address the question: Can Estella escape from the destructive behaviour encouraged by her upbringing, and societal expectations of women?

Kathy George says she didn't initially excel in English despite a love of writing from childhood. *Great Expectations* was one of her favourite books and she studied it in depth when she returned to university as a mature age student. She says she was aware of how her book would be regarded by fans of Dickens so has tried to stay as true as she was able to the original story. But she has changed the ending!

Estella is the second novel that Kathy George has written. Her debut novel is Sargasso which is a prequel to *Jane Eyre*. She has a master's degree in Australian Gothic Literature. Kathy has also written many short stories and is a winner of the Hal Porter Short Story Award.

You can read an interview with Kathy George at:
https://www.cindylspear.com/blog/interview-with-kathy-george-author-of-estella

The book is available on the web at various prices from $16.



Harper Collins
Soft Cover
May 2023, 400pp

Anne Burns

NSW DICKENS SOCIETY MEETINGS FOR THE REST OF THE YEAR

Saturday 5 August — DICKENS AND THE THEATRE 10.00 for 10.30

Michelle Cavanagh, Past President of the Society

Dickens was first and foremost, an entertainer. From childhood, and into adult life, he loved the stage; as a schoolboy, he and his fellow students put on plays in a miniature theatre to amuse themselves. Dickens loved and needed the outpouring of adulation he received, performing in amature theatricals throughout the 1840s and 50s before he achieved early fame as a writer.

Indeed, had he not come down with a severe cold on the morning of a scheduled audition at the Covent Garden theatre in the early 1830s, just before his writing gained attention, he may have made a career on the stage. Dickens close association with the theatre had an important impact on him as an author.

My talk will explore the theatricality of Dickens love of theatre and the many ways such events shaped his life.

Saturday 7 October — THE JOY OF LITERARY SOCIETIES 10.00 for 10.30

Susannah Fullerton

CELEBRATION MEETING FOR OUR 20TH ANNIVERSARY

Those of us who have had the privilege of being members of the NSW Dickens Society for twenty years will know about the pleasures of joining a literary society. But what makes a good literary society? Which ones have started with enthusiasm and then died away? How should they adapt to the changing world in which we live, how PC should they be, and what is their future?

Celebrate this important anniversary for our fabulous Dickens Society by coming along to this talk.

Thursday 26 October at 7pm (AEST) — ZOOM MEETING

Professor Catherine Waters

Catherine, who is an Australian, is the current President of the Dickens Fellowship. She took up the role on 1 July 2023 and will serve for three years. Earlier this year the NSW Society Committee had the pleasure of Catherine's company at a luncheon in Sydney while she was enjoying a restful holiday in NSW before beginning the new job in London. She will of course be speaking on Dickens related matters. Further information and Zoom connection details will follow.

Saturday 2 December — CHRISTMAS LUNCHEON

Planning has begun for our lovely Christmas Lunch at *Cellos*. The lunch is a joint occasion with the Brontë Society, and this year it is the turn of the Dickens Society to organize. We have a choice of live entertainment sorted and there are lots of traditions that will continue, such as publications distributed, crackers placed on the table, Yorkshire Tea packets and a wonderful Raffle. Lynn Clayton is representing the Dickens Society, and Michelle Cavanagh the Brontë Society. We do need a few other volunteers. Please consider helping with this very pleasant and fun project? The committee doesn't need to meet very often and we can manage a lot via emails. But we will especially need help on the day and people who may have some fresh ideas. Donations gratefully accepted for the Raffle. Suitable items would be anything Dickens or Brontë related, new books or vintage books. If unsure contact Lynn at the following address. Thank you. Email — *darlynn100@y7mail.com*

Answers to Quiz: 1. 1843, 2. Mr Fezziwig, 3. Bob Cratchit, 4. Jacob Marley, 5. 'Bah! Humbug!' 6. Fred, 7. Past girl friend 8. Fan Scrooge, 9. Three, 10. Ghost of Christmas Present, 11. Jacob Marley, 12. Ignorance and Want, 13. A turkey, 14. Tiny Tim, 15. One o'clock in the morning, 16. Ghost of Christmas Past, 17. Ghost of Christmas Present, 18. 7 years, 19. John Leech, 20. 'God bless us Every one!'