

London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

ADDITIONAL MEETINGS AT LUMEN Members are reminded there will be two additional events in this year's programme (arranged after the membership card went to print): first, on **Tuesday 24 October** Dr Paul Schlicke will speak on: 'Dickens's Early Sketches'.

Secondly, on **Tuesday, 14 November** Dr Joanna Robinson, Lecturer in Victorian Literature at University College, Cork, will speak on 'Staging Dickensian Drama: *The Frozen Deep*'. The talk will be based on Joanna's experience of producing and directing *Is She His Wife?* in 2015 and *The Frozen Deep* in 2016.

OUTING – ROCHESTER, SATURDAY 2 SEPTEMBER. Instead of going by coach, it is intended to take advantage of the new high-speed train route from London's St Pancras station. Anyone travelling by train from London will need to catch either the **9.55** or the **10.22** train from St Pancras, platforms 11 to 13. The visit starts outside Rochester station at **11.00**. To reserve a place on the guided tour, please send your name and contact details either to: postbox@dickensfellowship.org or by post to the Fellowship at the Charles Dickens Museum, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX, by **Thursday 31 August**.

Charles Dickens: an Introduction This is a short, new introduction to Dickens's life, character and work by **Professor Jenny Hartley** (a DF member and former President). It was favourably reviewed in the Spring Dickensian and a recent review in the Times Literary Supplement called Prof Hartley a '*fair, entertaining and careful chronicler of Dickens's life and an illuminating and inspiring reader of his works. For those unfamiliar with his writing, this is the best brief guide now available. For those of us who know it well, it encourages us to return to Dickens with renewed enthusiasm and to prepare to move again in the pages of a man whose vast imagination*

transformed the world'. The book is available at the Charles Dickens Museum (price £10.99).

A party at Doughty Street Prof Michael Slater found an extract in the diaries of Charles Macready, the actor, dated 7 January 1839: '*Went to supper at Dickens's, where there was a large party for the christening of his youngest and the birthday of his eldest. At the supper there were speeches, which much annoyed me*'. Michael wondered how many people were crammed into the dining room and what it was that so annoyed the Eminent Tragedian? He thought it sounded as though Dickens was, characteristically, introducing an element of theatre into what Macready clearly thought should have been a quiet family celebration.

Dining with Miriam While on the subject of parties, DF member Pat York has sent me a cutting from a recent Radio Times, featuring an interview with Miriam Margolyes (also of course a DF member). During the interview, Miriam is asked who would be her ideal guests for a "dream dinner party". Her list includes: Barry Humphries, Eileen Atkins, Julia Hobsbawm, Graham Norton, lawyer Helena Kennedy – and our very own 'Dickens expert, Michael Slater'!

Varied views from Eastern Europe.... A young Polish scholar called Aleksandra Budrewicz gave an interesting talk at the Birkbeck Dickens Day last year. She said that far and away the most popular Dickens story in Poland during the 19th and early 20th centuries was *The Cricket on the Hearth*. There was a production in Russia, however, attended by Lenin, who walked out in the middle, calling it 'bourgeois rubbish'.

....and from China Michael Slater has drawn my attention to an interesting item in the *Guardian* in May headed 'China's Charles Dickens: migrant worker's memoir of hard times becomes sensation'. It is an online essay, 'I am Fan Yusu', published on the social network 'WeChat', by a woman who 'looked to Charles Dickens for an escape from her life of rural poverty, immersing herself in the travails of *Oliver Twist* as he fled a Victorian workhouse and set off for the big

smoke'. Apparently her story of her own flight to the big city has made her a huge literary sensation in China.

Penny Readings Dickens, it appears, was popular in late-19th century Oxfordshire. Flora Thompson, in her semi-autobiographical book *'Lark Rise to Candleford'* describes a particular form of entertainment – the Penny Reading (already, she says, at that time a bit out of date). *'The star turn was an old gentleman who lived nearby who, in his youth, had heard Dickens reading his own works in public, and aimed at reproducing the expression and mannerisms of the master. If the falsetto of his female characters sometimes rose to a screech, his facetious young men were almost too slyly humorous, and some of his listeners felt embarrassed when the deep, low voice he kept for pathetic passages broke, and he had to wipe away real tears, his rendering still had an authentic ring. The comic passages, featuring Pickwick, Dick Swiveller, or Sairy (sic) Gamp, were punctuated with bursts of laughter. Oliver Twist asking for more and the deathbed of Little Nell drew tears from the women and throat-clearings from the men. The audience did not read the books – they liked to listen, but they were not readers. They were waiting, a public ready-made, for the wireless and the cinema.'*

Absolute rubbish! DF member Philip Gillard has written in with some views on the 2012 BBC adaptation of *Great Expectations* (see March edition of LP). He, like me, was irritated by the liberties the screenwriter, Sarah Phelps, took with the book. He said removing Joe Gargery's expression, 'What larks', "is equivalent to removing 'Barkis is willing!' from David Copperfield". "These soap writers," he says, "who constantly tamper with Dickens's works, seem to be under the delusion that they are on a par with, or even better than, England's greatest writer!" Mr Gillard also sees red when the comment is made that 'If Dickens was alive today, he would be writing for soaps'. "Absolute rubbish!" he says. "That statement does nothing other than bring Dickens down to their grubby level and elevates them to the giddy heights of his."

Dickens the rule-breaker A friend has sent in an article by John Mullan, a professor of English Literature from University College, London in "The Author" magazine. "Experiments in prose style set CD apart from all novelists. He deliberately used clichés {and then expanded on them}, e.g. in *A Christmas Carol*. Old Marley was "as dead as a door-nail". He then writes a whole paragraph discussing the saying "Dead as a door-nail". In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the pious hypocrite, Pecksniff, while telling rich old Martin that he despises

money, "... looked as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth" and elaborates on this by adding, "He rather looked as if any quantity of butter might have been made out of him, by churning the milk of human kindness, as it spouted upwards from his heart". Sir Leicester Dedlock's family (*Bleak House*) is described as "old as the hills" - and infinitely more respectable. He had a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks." The writer also comments on CD's use of lists, another rule-breaking habit, which I would like to say more about in the next issue of LP. Could anyone help me by writing in with one of their favourite CD "lists" (e.g. the description of the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*)?

Remarkably shallow accounts..... More on Dickensian style, this time from journalist Simon Heffer, writing about *Hard Times* in the *Daily Telegraph* in February. He likes the novel "because it is short and tightly written and gets to the point. In some of his epics (such as *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* or *Nicholas Nickleby*) contrived sub-plots, minute descriptions of sitting-room interiors and detailed but remarkably shallow accounts of the absurd traits of minor characters pad out the narrative". Yes, but those "minute descriptions" of interiors and people's absurdities – and what they wore – are surely part of the joy of reading Dickens? (Ed.)

Get a Dickens Discount! Further to the 'Dickens as "Relate" counsellor' item in the last LP, DF member Derek Mortimer has sent me an advert for "Relate", recently installed on one of the main roads into central Portsmouth, near the Birthplace Museum. It asks: "**How are things at home? Is your relationship at breaking point?**" and recommends people to search "Relate, Portsmouth" – and to quote 'DICKENS' to receive a discount. A little bizarre, but I'm sure a shared interest in Dickens would be guaranteed to bring any warring couple together!.....

.....A troublesome teenager Incidentally, Derek reminds me that the *London Particular* is now fifteen years old. The first edition was published in March 2002.

"DO NOT FORGET the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not forget the appointed suffering." (Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit*). Even more important - do not forget to send in any contributions or comments to: Alison Gowans, "Danesdyke", 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – aligowans@hotmail.co.uk