



Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

December 17

When Charles Dickens read an 1843 parliamentary report on the realities of child labor in the factories of Victorian England, he wrote to one of the commissioners. His plan, he informed the commissioner, was to publish a pamphlet entitled, "An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child." A few days later he wrote the commissioner again to say that he had other plans: "I am not at liberty to explain them any further, just now; but rest assured that when you know them, and see what I do, and where, and how, you will certainly feel that a Sledge hammer has come down with twenty times the force — twenty thousand times the force — I could exert by following out my first idea."



Dickens's "sledge hammer" blow for the poor turned out to be *A Christmas Carol*, written in a six-week rush and published at his own expense on December 17th, 1843. It was one of many public and private efforts by Dickens to bring about social reform — prison visits, charity drives, promotion of the "Ragged Schools," cash for this fired worker or that orphan's education — and to challenge the "sleek, slobbering, bow-paunched, over-fed, apoplectic, snorting cattle" in the upper classes.

Some in the upper classes were like-minded; not a few went as far as they dared to mock Dickens and the "cult of benevolence" with which they associated him. They dubbed him "Mr. Popular Sentiment," and scoffed at the naive politics of his novels, calling them the "gospel of geniality." Still, they bought his gilt-edged, hand-illustrated Christmas Book. The initial, 6000 copies of *A Christmas Carol* sold out the first day, and Dickens had high hopes that his blow for the poor might also do something for his own poverty. He was bitterly disappointed: high production costs ate up most of his expected profit, and then legal fees to contest a pirated edition of the book left him in debt.

It was not as literature but as theatre that the Carol would eventually bring Dickens new fame and much wealth. He toured his one-man show across England and America for fifteen years, and no matter the season he brought the sledge hammer along. His performances became polished, professional and very lucrative, but newspaper reviews and private letters abound with descriptions of how moving they were. Dickens himself wrote that each time he read the line, "...and to Tiny Tim who did NOT die..." and the hall erupted in "a most prodigious shout and roar of thunder," he was also near tears.

Dickens's last reading of the Carol, and his last one-man performance, just three months before he died. A huge crowd had filled St. James Hall, and another stood in the street just to see him enter. Dickens was ill and weak, but the usual red geranium was in the evening coat. The audience applauded before, during and after; with his final bow, he said that he hoped to keep writing, "...but from these garish lights I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell." And this time, wrote his son, he did cry -- to "a storm of cheering as I have never seen equaled in my life."





Sunday 17

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* went on sale, 1867; Ford Madox Ford began *The Good Soldier*: "This is the saddest story I have ever heard...."

Monday 18

Marcel Proust died, 1870; Damon Runyan's ashes were scattered over Broadway in 1946: "All of life is six to five against."

Tuesday 19

Benjamin Franklin began publishing *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 1732; Emily Bronte died, 1848; Jean Genet born, 1910

Wednesday 20

D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* -- once described as a "sermon-on-the-mount of Venus" -- was banned in the U.S., 1929

Thursday 21

Rebecca West (Cicily Fairfield) born, 1892: "The greatest use of marriage is for riveting the fact of paternity in the male mind."

Friday 22

George Eliot died, 1880; Samuel Beckett died, 1989: "The same old questions and the same old answers -- ah, there's nothing like them!"

Saturday 23

Norman MacLean born, 1902: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing..." (*A River Runs Through It*)

December 2006

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