



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

## What the Dickens?

**We are not looking at a career in literature at all, but a vigorous and eternally opinionated life expressed only in part through a dozen or so masterpieces.**

The Dickens bicentenary with all its hullabaloo is upon us. *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* are already broadcast and doubtless there is much, much more to come. Claire Tomalin's splendid *Life* is weighing down my bedside table and I suppose I shall now have to consign the previous standard biography, Edgar Johnson's from 1952, to the jumble. But how faithful is all this to the great man's intentions; how much a reinvention, brushing him down and burnishing him up for a new age?

### First glimpse

I was lucky. Voracious reader though I always was, nobody held my nose to the Dickens grindstone as a child. It wasn't until I was in my mid-20s that, on an afternoon that had lost its momentum, at the house of a friend, I picked up *Oliver Twist* from where it happened to lay beside me on a comfortable sofa and read my first words. It is very seldom, in my experience, that you recognise genius at the very first glance. But here, within a line or two, I found myself in awe: utterly captivated by a storyteller from whom life and energy and wit and invention poured in an irresistible tide.

I bought and read all the novels in a rush. Some I have re-read over and over. There they all are, rather tatty Penguins, orange backs variously faded, pages brown and brittle, waiting for the day when I might – just might – roar through them all again.

### Warts and all

Tomalin reminds me, though that the books are distinctly uneven in quality and even within each book there are

passages of greatness and whole sections which charity would urge us to overlook. The first 14 chapters of *David Copperfield* would be sufficient to sustain Dickens' unique position in English literature on their own, says Tomalin. But the second half of *Dombey and Son* is a pale shadow of the first. Victorian England was plunged into mourning by Dickens' description of the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, while a few decades later Oscar Wilde, in a witticism which rings true today, wrote 'A man must have a heart of stone to be able to read of the death of Little Nell without laughing out loud'.

Wobbly quality, meandering plots sustained only by the richness and variety of the characters, are the probably inevitable results of a method of publication unique to the period. Almost all Dickens' novels, as well as those of many others, were written and then immediately issued in monthly sections. My tattered paperbacks were not conceived as books at all, but as monthly magazines of 15 or 20 thousand words each, sustained for a couple of years. There was no opportunity to plot the whole thing out in advance in any detail; no opportunity to revise and re-write as a modern author would certainly do; no opportunity to edit and check that every strand connects without untidy loose ends.

That helter-skelter work schedule undoubtedly contributes to Dickens' exuberance, his torrent of words and unforgettable characters, when he is at his best, whether in the earliest books which need very little structure (*Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*) or later in life when he had

begun to plan rather more carefully (*Bleak House*). But in his middle years, short of money, balancing awkwardly a tumultuous social life with a family expanding by a baby a year, arguing with publishers, editing a succession of daily newspapers and periodicals, writing and appearing in plays, setting up a home for 'fallen women', moving house hither and yon in London, Broadstairs, Paris, Genoa, Rome, America – the quality of Dickens' 'books' reflects his changing state of mind, his health, his weariness, his happiness.

### **A force of nature**

Perhaps all that should remind us that we are not looking at a career in literature at all, but a vigorous and eternally opinionated life expressed only in part through a dozen or so masterpieces. What endures in Dickens is not only his sense of fun, the spoofs and caricatures, but also the depth and constancy of his social commitment. Perhaps it can be argued that it was easier in that transitional age of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to identify and adhere to good liberal causes. In everything from public execution, to child labour to public health, to education, to politics, poverty and the law, there were causes in which the interests of the many very obviously differed from those of the few. And it was Dickens' unvarying adherence to the interests of the many, however rich and famous he became, that gives his work its bite and assured him his audiences then and now.

It is that sure populism that probably justifies the 'modernising' of Dickens even though (unlike Sherlock Holmes or Shakespeare), we have yet to see television or film productions in modern dress. I found Gillian Anderson breath-taking as Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* a couple of years ago, and almost as compelling as the bitter, mad, child-abusing Miss Havisham in this Christmas's *Great Expectations*. Her journey from *The X-Files* seems no distance at all and she was utterly believable as a woman burdened by her secrets. However, to further 'happify' a happy

ending about which Dickens himself had doubts, by bringing Pip and Estella together in blissful union, without the intervening years of remorse and poverty working abroad that are laid down for Pip in the book, seemed to me a step too far. It transformed Pip from thoughtless prig, turned aside from any sense of loyalty or enduring affection by his mysterious 'expectations' – a lottery winner of the most vulgar kind, if you like – to a briefly-deluded but deserving adolescent. Not what the book is about.

In the greater scheme of things such diversions probably mean very little. Like me, bored on my sofa 40 years ago, there will be more people this year than for years past picking up one of the books and being enthralled by it. But it would be unfortunate if the indignation which drove Dickens' creativity alongside his *joie de vivre* were lost in translation. It is as much needed today, in more subtly disguised places, as it was when Dickens was writing.

© 2012 David Sherlock  
[info@beyondstandards.net](mailto:info@beyondstandards.net)