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On the matter of prefaces, Dickens sided with Henry Fielding. Be honest about what you have provided, Fielding wrote in his “Introduction” to *Tom Jones* (1750). Let customers peruse the “Bill of Fare,” and then make their decision. They will either “stay and regale” themselves with “the Entertainment” provided by the host, or they will depart elsewhere. In a variation of these words, Dickens stated a similar principle when he advised Richard Henry Horne on “the expediency of the preface” Horne had sent him. Don’t undercut what you have written with an elaborate justification, Dickens urged. Discerning readers understand that an author or editor “makes a weak case when he writes to explain his writing” (*Letters* 6: 636).

The draft preface in question accompanied a volume of “Minor Poems” for which Horne failed to find a publisher. The advice Dickens gave, however, was sound. Provide too much by way of explanation, and a lengthy preface will take a book “by the throat and strangle it.” Of this, Dickens was “quite certain – absolutely sure” – in fact. Keep the preface short and let the contents of the volume “rest manfully and calmly” on what the work has to offer. Readers, like diners, will make their choice.

This *Companion* offers a range of focal points posited on the assumption that factual and referential knowledge from many fields will enhance one’s engagement with Dickens’s works. Dickens was, is, and will remain a hugely entertaining writer. His fiction is readily accessible without expert guidance. One can read him in ignorance of literary theory; one can invoke the theory of one’s preference and read with equal pleasure. Feminists will focus on patriarchy and male domination. Adherents of cultural studies will blur boundaries between low and high cultures. Reader-response practitioners will have their way with the text as well. All readings, however, draw on knowledge of some kind, be it social, historical, cultural, literary, linguistic, or legal.

It is the aim of this volume to provide a selection of contexts, arranged in five sections, which readers can choose to explore with profit. To engage Dickens with understanding, one needs to know something of the man, of the literary education he
acquired, largely through self-directed reading, and of the age in which he lived and about which he remains perhaps one of the most widely informed observers. His 15 novels speak for themselves. The authors of this group of essays follow the editor's injunction to avoid any single interpretative or theoretical orientation and treat the principal literary, artistic, and thematic issues of each work. What readers – common and professional – have made of his novels forms the focus of the three essays in the closing section.

Contributors provide details of the works they cite. Readers should note, however, that the suggestions for further reading are simply that. The sheer volume of available material makes impossible in a collection of this length a full bibliographical record of pertinent essays, books, and studies in print. For those who wish to look backwards to admirable guides furnished some years ago but still worth consulting, they would do well to start with Ada Nisbet’s “Charles Dickens” (1966). In a later volume, Philip Collins followed with another informative and readable chapter on Dickens in *Victorian Fiction* (1978). Other sources deserve mention: studies devoted to material on a single novel (the annotated Garland Dickens Bibliographies), the first of four volumes of annotated bibliographies of Dickens materials undertaken by Duane DeVries (2004), the yearly survey of publications provided by *Dickens Studies Annual*, and the open checklist published in *Dickens Quarterly*.

Each has its merits and its limitations; collectively, they constitute the means of surveying an impressive record of writing, past and current, of materials missed by entering a sought term or title into an electronic database and accepting the result. Internet resources grow in sophistication and effectiveness. Search engines and the availability of digitalized texts augment literary research and will continue to extend their utility. No one method or printed source, however, will suffice, just as surely as the essays in this volume provide no final word on any one of the featured topics. Rather, each offers readers an opportunity to acquaint themselves with topics set before them. The Bill of Fare is plain to read. May “good digestion” wait on appetite, “And health on both!” (*Macbeth* III. iv. 38).

**References**


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Collaborative works incur many debts and this volume of essays is no exception. I am most grateful to all the contributors both for the quality of their essays and for their efficient and prompt cooperation. I am equally indebted to people behind the scenes: to Al Bertrand with whom I first discussed the design of this collection, and to Karen Wilson for all her editorial support. I also extend my thanks to Sue Ashton for her speedy and excellent work as copy-editor.

David Paroissien
Abbreviations


Part I

Perspectives on the Life
All life was grist to the writing mill that was Charles Dickens, particularly his own life and especially his childhood. “All these things have worked together to make me what I am,” he wrote of one period of his childhood. Born at Portsmouth on February 7, 1812, he left the town at the beginning of January 1815, carrying memories of a military parade and the landlady of the house in which the Dickens family had lodged, later used in the creation of Mrs. Pipchin in *Dombey and Son*. John Dickens, his father, had started as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at Somerset House in London in 1805, and in June 1809 had married Elizabeth Barrow, the sister of a colleague. The Admiralty moved the clerk to Portsmouth, a major naval dockyard in the forefront of Britain’s war against Napoleon, where the young couple set up home in a brand new house at Mile End Terrace. Here their first child, Frances Elizabeth, was born on October 28, 1810, followed 15 months later by a brother, baptized in the local church as Charles John Huffam Dickens, but known to the family throughout his childhood as Charley. John Dickens’s domicile arrangements always had an impermanency about them, and the new baby stayed only five months in his birthplace before being carried across town to lodgings in Hawke Street, much closer to the Navy Pay Office; and 18 months later to Wish Street in the adjacent area of Southsea. Here they were joined by a young widowed sister of Mrs. Dickens, Mary Allen, whose name was given to a third child, Alfred Allen Dickens. Unfortunately, Alfred died of water on the brain just six months later.

With the defeat of Napoleon and the end of a war against America, the Admiralty’s presence at Portsmouth was reduced, and on January 1, 1815 the Dickens family was moved back to London, probably staying in lodgings in Norfolk Street. Here a fourth child, Letitia, was born. Situated near Oxford Street, they were close to John Dickens’s older brother William, who ran a coffee shop there; they were close also to Grosvenor Street in Mayfair, home of the wealthy Crewe family where Charley’s grandmother, now 70 years old, served as housekeeper. His grandfather, William Dickens, butler
to the Crewes, had died many years before, in 1785. This early contact with London saw Charley through the ages of three and four, leaving him with a memory of a visit to a bazaar in Soho Square, probably with his grandmother, and the purchase of a harlequin’s wand.

Off then went the family to the Navy dockyards on the River Medway in Kent, first to Sheerness for about three months and then on to “the birthplace of [Dickens’s] fancy” at Rochester and Chatham (Forster bk. 1, ch. 1), two towns so joined at the hip that it was difficult to say where one ended and the other began. John Dickens rented a house at 2 Ordnance Terrace, in an elevated part of Chatham, commanding beautiful views over the river and the surrounding countryside. Three more children were born, Harriet in 1819, Frederick in 1820, and Alfred in 1822, making the house a little crowded with six children, their parents, Aunt Mary, and two servants, 13-year-old Mary Weller and elderly Jane Bonny. Dickens later wrote happy accounts of his time in Chatham, playing with friends, attending school, visiting the theater and pantomime, and going to parties; there were regular walks with his father and with Mary Weller, trips up the Medway on the Navy Pay Yacht, and hours spent reading. Many years later, he recollected that one of the walks with his father took him past a large house at Gad’s Hill and his father promised that if he worked hard then he might come to live there.

It was in Chatham that Charley first tried his juvenile hand at creative writing, where he enacted plays in the kitchen, and where he first enjoyed the applause of an audience, standing on a table and singing at the local inn. These were activities that forever echoed through his life. At the end of 1821, Aunt Mary married Thomas Lamert, an army surgeon, and these two soon after moved to Ireland, taking with them the servant Jane Bonny but leaving behind a stepson, James Lamert, who was later to have a profound influence on Dickens’s life. The new baby, Alfred, was given the middle name of Lamert, but the family was shocked soon after when news came from Ireland that Aunt Mary had died, aged just 34.

In Chatham, it is unlikely that Charley had any idea that his father had difficulties with money. John Dickens’s salary had rocketed from £200 in 1816 to £441 in 1822, but he handled it badly, and in 1819 borrowed £200 on which he failed to make the repayments, causing a family rift with a brother-in-law who had stood surety. There were other debts in Chatham, and in 1822 the family moved to a smaller house at St. Mary’s Place on The Brook where they stayed for a year. That same year John Dickens was moved back to London, but Charley was left behind for several months, staying with his schoolmaster, William Giles. He later recollected his own journey to London, a small child of 10:

Through all the years that have since passed have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed – like game – and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it. (Journalism 4: 140)
His parents had taken a small house at Bayham Street in Camden Town, just on the edge of London. Life was quiet here: Charley was disappointed not to be sent to school, especially since his older sister was boarded at the Royal Academy of Music, and he passed his days running errands, looking after the younger children, and cleaning boots. An unnamed orphan from the Chatham workhouse had been brought with them; so too had James Lamert, who built a toy theater for Charles. This stirred his imagination, as did visits into the city: to his godfather Christopher Huffam who supplied ships from his business on the Thames at Limehouse; to his uncle Thomas Barrow who lived above a bookshop in Soho, where books were borrowed and Charley wrote a description of his uncle’s barber, father of the artist Turner; and to his grandmother Dickens who gave him a silver watch and probably told him stories, not only fairytales but reminiscences of her own and stories from the pages of history, as she did with the Crewe children. Such reminiscences most likely included the Gordon Riots and the French Revolution, events with which the Crewe family were intimately linked and which became the subjects of Dickens’s only two “historical” novels. This casual way of life continued for about 15 months, toward the end of which the financial difficulties of the Dickens family caught up with them and necessitated profound change. A revival of their fortunes, they believed, would be found in the establishment of a school, to be run by Charley’s mother, and to this end at Christmas 1823 they moved to a rather grand new house in Gower Street North.

With no pupils registering at the school, the scheme collapsed in a matter of weeks and hope turned to despair. James Lamert tried to help by offering paid employment and some business training to 12-year-old Charley. The 6–7 shillings a week were seized upon by his parents, and a nightmare for the boy began at Warren’s Blacking, a firm that produced boot blacking from a rat-infested warehouse beside the Thames. References to Warren’s and to boot blacking were later scattered throughout his books and the factory was transposed into Murdstone and Grinby’s wine-bottling business in *David Copperfield*. Then, only two weeks after Charley’s start at Warren’s, his father was arrested for debt and confined to the Marshalsea Prison. It was a tearful, demeaning episode that forever left its mark and legacy in the mind, life, and books of Charles Dickens. The Gower Street home had to be given up, their belongings – including books – sold, and the family moved into prison. Charley was first found a room to share with other boys at Little College Street, Camden Town, the home of a family friend, Ellen Roylance, and after a few weeks a room of his own at Lant Street, not far from the prison.

John Dickens’s incarceration lasted only three months, during which time his mother died, leaving him the large sum of £450, which later helped toward paying his debts. His financial position was further improved when the Admiralty granted his retirement on the grounds of ill health with an annual pension of £146, supplemented by modest earnings from a new career in journalism as a correspondent for the *British Press*. Upon release, their friend Mrs. Roylance took the family in for a short while, after which a few months were spent at an address in Hampstead before they all finally settled at Johnson Street in Somers Town.
Meanwhile, throughout this post-prison time, Charley continued to work at Warren’s, though his place of work was moved from the warehouse to a rather public position in the front window of a shop in Chandos Street in the colorful Covent Garden area. It was not until March 1825 that his father took him away from a situation in which he felt neglected and unhappy, and sent him once more to school. His year at Warren’s Blacking, a year he thought would go on forever, was seared onto his young mind. As an adult, the vulnerable or parentless child featured throughout his books: Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Smike, Jo, David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, Pip, and others. The adult Dickens always drew attention to the plight of poor and neglected young people.

For two years, he returned to what the modern observer would recognize as a normal childhood, attending school at the grandly named Wellington House Academy, at the end of which his parents found a position for him as a clerk with solicitors Ellis and Blackmore of Gray’s Inn. The work was dull but later supplied material for his pen, and after 18 months he moved on to another solicitor, Charles Molloy of Lincoln’s Inn, where he met his lifelong friend and legal adviser, Thomas Mitton. He stayed for three months; then, aged just 17, displayed a great sense of self-confidence and a level of decision-making probably independent of his parents by striking out as a self-employed, shorthand reporter. His earliest commissions were for civil law cases held in Doctors’ Commons where he honed the skills of his craft before adding to his repertoire, probably from 1830, reports of proceedings in the House of Commons, writing for the Mirror of Parliament and the True Sun. Over nearly five years, he established a reputation for speed and accuracy as one of the best in the business, and was eventually taken on to the regular staff of the Morning Chronicle (see chapter 11).

It was during these years as a youth and young man that he developed many of the interests, skills, and traits that were to shape and color the rest of his life. He frequently indulged his love of theater, sometimes serious drama like Shakespeare but often music-hall entertainment. It became a passion for him, attending some theater, he later told Forster, almost every night for at least three years. Trained as a singer at the Royal Academy of Music, his sister Fanny also mixed in theatrical circles, introducing her brother to actor John Harley and musician John Hullah. Indeed, such was his love for the stage that he considered he might have a career there – and in a way that eventually turned out to be the case. Perhaps as part of this aspiration, he became a careful observer of people, their mannerisms, and accents, which he learned to imitate, a talent also ascribed to his mother. A colorful, stylish way of dressing was established, sometimes described as “flashy,” which was to stay with him throughout his life.

At this time, London became entrenched as part of his consciousness: building on his wanderings as a child at Warren’s Blacking, he was now able to walk further, delve deeper, understand better the people and the institutions of this great and growing metropolis. Although he knew it all, his centrifugal point was established in his teens: the office of Ellis and Blackmore where he started was little more than a half-mile from the office of All the Year Round, the periodical he edited at his death.
If London was the spinning center of his life, though, his work as a reporter sent him throughout the country, often at as great a speed as coach and horses would permit: to Birmingham and Bristol, Edinburgh and Exeter, Chelmsford and Kettering.

It was also at this time that he first fell seriously in love. Maria Beadnell, a year older than Dickens, was pretty and flirtatious, and in an unkind game she encouraged, rejected, and teased her admirer for about four years. His letters to her that have survived demonstrate the depth of his feelings and the thinness of her response. It would seem there was little enthusiasm for the match from her parents: as a banker, Maria’s father must have frowned upon marriage to a young journalist whose father had been imprisoned as an insolvent debtor and still struggled to keep his head above water. Dickens gave up the pursuit soon after his twenty-first birthday but later reflected on the affair by casting Maria as Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield*. The Beadnells, with their prestigious address in the City of London’s Lombard Street, were doubtless unimpressed with the peripatetic nature of Dickens’s home life. Between the ages of 17 and 22 he shared seven different addresses with his parents as they moved around the London area to avoid creditors. In addition, he twice rented rooms, once by himself and once with a friend, before finally separating his living arrangements from those of his parents in December 1834, taking rooms at Furnival’s Inn and carrying with him his younger brother Fred.

Dickens’s parliamentary reporting had appeared before the public a great many times and his reputation as a reporter was high, but this was nothing to the elation he felt when his first piece of creative writing was published in the *Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. He received no payment but was sufficiently pleased to see his work in all the glory of print to contribute a further six pieces over the next 12 months, the first five unsigned but the sixth, which appeared in August 1834, appearing with the pseudonym Boz. In the same month, he first met his future wife, Catherine Hogarth, daughter of the music and drama editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, and was taken on to the permanent staff of that newspaper, with a not insubstantial salary of £273 a year (his grandmother had earned only 8 guineas a year as a housekeeper; a schoolmaster at that time might earn about £35 a year, a governess or curate only £30).

Besides employing him as a reporter, the *Morning Chronicle* also published five “street sketches” before the end of the year, all under the name of Boz, for which the author still received no payment. However, such was the originality shown in the sketches that when a sister paper, the *Evening Chronicle*, began publication in January 1835, edited by George Hogarth, and when Dickens proposed a series of twenty sketches, the proposal was taken up and his salary was increased, during publication of the sketches, from five guineas a week to seven guineas – his first payment as an author. The sketches attracted attention, and when the series in the *Evening Chronicle* drew to a close in September 1835, Dickens found a further outlet through *Bell’s Life in London*, which had the added attraction of paying more money. In another major step forward, the publisher John Macrone, whom Dickens had met socially at the home of William Harrison Ainsworth, suggested book publication for the sketches,
People like Macrone took to Dickens easily, as did his editor Hogarth, so that Dickens became a regular visitor at Hogarth’s home in Chelsea. Here he met, fell in love with, and, in May 1835, proposed to Hogarth’s eldest daughter, Catherine. Dickens’s letters to her from this period, always treasured by Catherine, help chart the progress of their romance, culminating in their marriage at St. Luke’s Chelsea on April 2, 1836 (Letters 1). That year proved exceptionally busy and successful. In February, the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared, and just two days later Chapman and Hall offered Dickens the authorship of *The Pickwick Papers*, to be written and published monthly in 20 episodes – publication started on March 31. In May, in what seemed a good idea at the time, Dickens agreed to write a three-volume novel for Macrone, but so fast did demand for his work move that this was overtaken three months later by a promise to write two three-volume novels for Richard Bentley.

Eleven new sketches and tales appeared through the year, mostly in the *Morning Chronicle*, to which was added a political pamphlet *Sunday under Three Heads*. Maintaining his fascination with the theater, Dickens wrote and had produced *The Strange Gentleman* in September and *The Village Coquettes* in December; both works were also published in book form. In November, he agreed to edit a monthly periodical called *Bentley’s Miscellany*, and in December the second series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared. These events, together with the spiraling popularity of *Pickwick*, ensured a growing reputation and a growing income for Dickens, but his promises and his value outstripped his ability to deliver, resulting, eventually, in acrimony with publishers and renegotiation. So that he could better devote time to writing, he resigned from the *Morning Chronicle*. This whirlwind year ended with his introduction to John Forster, author, critic, editor, and literary adviser, who was to become Dickens’s lifelong friend, confidant, and eventually biographer.

Dickens had shown energy and commitment as a newspaper reporter, but to these traits of character was now added extensive demand for his output that resulted in an outpouring of creativity. Commentators and public alike recognized and welcomed an original new voice. Monthly sales of *Pickwick* soared, rising from less than 500 in the early months to 40,000 at the end. Only halfway through *Pickwick*, he started to write *Oliver Twist*, published in monthly parts in *Bentley’s Miscellany*; completion of *Pickwick* was followed swiftly with commencement of *Nicholas Nickleby*; he then tumbled into *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, both presented through the artificial and not wholly successful publishing vehicle called *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. Dickens’s output was partly driven by the demands of monthly publication, a device not new but brilliantly suited to and exploited by Dickens and adhered to throughout his career. Still he found time to write a burletta called *Is She his Wife?*, two short collections called *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* and *Sketches of Young Couples*, as well as editing the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* and *The Pic-nic Papers*. This last item comprised miscellaneous pieces by various authors, including Dickens, published for the benefit of the wife and children of John Macrone, publisher of *Sketches by Boz*, Macrone having
died suddenly at the age of 28. Here was a man of dynamism, whom Forster captured in a few lines:

there was that in the face as I first recollect it which no time could change, and which remained implanted on it unalterably to the last. This was the quickness, keenness, and practical power, the eager, restless, energetic outlook on each several feature, that seemed to tell so little of a student or writer of books, and so much of a man of action and business in the world. Light and motion flashed from every part of it. “It was as if made of steel,” was said of it . . . It has the life and soul in it of fifty human beings. (Forster bk. 2, ch. 1)

From the beginning, Dickens was popular with the literary world. Comparisons with other writers, and artists, were numerous. He became the soul of Hogarth, the Cruikshank of writers, the Constable of fiction; he was compared with Smollett, Sterne, Fielding, Defoe, Goldsmith, Cervantes, Washington Irving, Victor Hugo, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Shakespeare. His schoolmaster from Chatham included in a letter to him the epithet “the inimitable Boz,” which Dickens took up and repeated. Some reviewers were more cautious:

The fact is, Mr. Dickens writes too often and too fast; on the principle, we presume, of making hay whilst the sun shines, he seems to have accepted at once all engagements that were offered to him . . . If he persists much longer in this course, it requires no gift of prophecy to foretell his fate – he has risen like a rocket, and he will come down like the stick. (Collins 1971: 62)

The public spoke with their money: monthly sales of Oliver Twist rose to 7,500, Nicholas Nickleby’s first number sold 50,000, Master Humphrey’s Clock started at 60,000, dropped off but picked up to 100,000 during the final installments of The Old Curiosity Shop; at only 30,000, sales of Barnaby Rudge were good but not spectacular. At the end of each run of monthly parts, the completed book would be published, with the advantage of further sales. Such popularity brought other benefits: election to two clubs, the Garrick and the Athenaeum, an invitation to stand as a Member of Parliament, which he declined, dinners given in his honor, the freedom of the city of Edinburgh, and invitations to public speaking: Dickens reveled in such performances, was reported to be an outstanding speaker, and continued them for the rest of his life (Speeches).

If his public life was hectic, so too was his private. Having married in April 1836, his first child, Charles junior, was born nine months later in January 1837, followed by Mary in 1838, Kate in 1839, and Walter in 1841; others followed relentlessly: Francis in 1844, Alfred in 1845, Sydney in 1847, Henry in 1849, Dora in 1850, and Edward in 1852. His children pleased him more as youngsters than they did as adults, never quite matching up to his demanding standards and straining his financial resources. So, too, did his parents and his siblings test his patience and his bank balance, particularly his father.
Charles often invited John Dickens to social events: to theaters, dinners, holidays, and parties. He shared Charles’s good fortune, and between 1835 and 1839 we have no evidence of money troubles coming between them. Toward the end of that period it is probable that John Dickens’s journalistic work dried up, yet still he was swept along by the new style of life his son was living, the new circle of friends, enjoyment of life, the optimism and energy that surrounded Charles, a growing fame that was attaching to him. John Dickens probably felt himself part of it and he continued to spend more money than he had coming in. His mismanagement burst to the surface in March 1839, and seemed to come as a surprise to his son. But Charles acted swiftly and resolved to move his parents to Exeter in Devonshire, as far away as possible from the temptations of London and the people who were owed money. He set up home for them and settled all the debts, estimating his father to have cost him £300–400. John Dickens’s stay in Devon lasted three years, but he borrowed and spent money as easily there as in London, driving his son to new heights of exasperation. He started to sell samples of his son’s writing and signature. In his quest for money, he tapped a local newspaper editor, Dickens’s bank in London, and Dickens’s friend Macready. Dickens put a disclaimer in the London newspapers: “certain persons bearing . . . the surname of our client have put into circulation, with the view of more readily obtaining credit, certain acceptances made payable at his private residence . . . Such bills made payable as aforesaid will not be paid” (Letters 2: 225). Dickens considered sending his father abroad but relented and went himself, visiting America for the first six months of 1842.

The following October they were all back in London, the Devonshire exile being given up on both sides. Over the following three years, John Dickens continued to behave as badly as ever he had. Perhaps we will never know the full extent of his misdemeanors, since so many of Dickens’s letters were later systematically destroyed or cut by his biographer, his relations, and by Dickens himself to hide the behavior of his father. Nevertheless, enough have survived to demonstrate his anger and frustration. In September 1843, for example, he wrote:

I am amazed and confounded by the audacity of his ingratitude . . . tell him that his letter has disgusted me beyond expression; and that I have no more reference to anything he wants or wishes or threatens or would do or wouldn’t do, in taking on myself this new Burden . . . Nothing makes me so wretched, or so unfit for what I have to do, as these things. They are so entirely beyond my own controul, so far out of my reach, such a drag-chain on my life, that for the time they utterly dispirit me, and weigh me down. (Letters 3: 576)

From the earliest times it was clear that John Dickens was not the sort of father who could be relied upon to look after the needs of his family. Charles, as the eldest brother and with his earning power, his talents, his connections, and his personality, effectively became the head of the family. He helped his brothers and sisters with education, used his influence to find them work, advised and castigated them; he