The Man Who Invented Christmas: Charles Dickens & A Christmas Carol

ARCHIVED ONLINE EXHIBIT

Originally displayed at the Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina
Selected illustrations from the Department of Rare Books & Special Collections
Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina
Archived September 27, 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Archived Online Exhibit.......................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 2
Beginning ............................................................................................................................................... 3
Charles Dickens continued..................................................................................................................... 6
INTRODUCTION

Selected illustrations from the
Department of Rare Books & Special Collections
Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina
BEGINNING


Dickens’s first writing on the Christmas theme, this essay originally appeared signed “Tibbs,” under the title “Christmas Festivities,” in Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle, Dec. 27, 1835, before its publication here in book form. Dickens concludes by asserting that family Christmas family dinners do more to arouse human sympathy and perpetuate good feeling “Than all the homilies that have ever been written, by all the Divines that have ever lived.”


Because Dickens usually published his novels in serial form, he took the opportunity of introducing appropriate seasonal incidents, rather as in a modern long-running television series. Displayed here are two of the original blue-wrapped number parts, one open to show Dickens’s paean to “Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days.”


The Christmas Tree only became fashionable in England in the 1840s, following Queen Victoria’s marriage to her German Prince Consort, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Dickens opened the first Christmas issue of his new (and widely successful) new weekly magazine with an article on the new “pretty German toy,” but even within this first page he has slipped into reminiscence of his childhood Christmases, well before Prince Albert’s arrival.

“That pretty German toy, a Christmas tree.” Engraving in the Illustrated London News, Christmas Number, 1848.

While crowns and thrones topple throughout Europe in the Year of Revolutions, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria, and the first installments of their
extensive family, gather delightedly round the palace Christmas tree.


The idea for Dickens’s most famous Christmas book came to him during a brief visit to Manchester, early in October 1843. Although he was committed to writing monthly parts for his serial-in-progress Martin Chuzzlewit, his financial needs were pressing, and he had the new book ready for his printers by the second week in November. The original of the autograph manuscript, only 68 pages long, is now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Shown here from the published facsimile are Dickens’s revisions to the discussion of Marley’s death, together with a transcription of the same passage.


The small format, decorative gilt binding, and coloured illustrations indicate the book’s aim at the Christmas giftbook market. Dickens indeed had visions of earning a quick 1000 pounds with it, and it was an immediate success with both critics and the public. W. M. Thackeray, not himself yet known as a novelist, commented in Fraser's Magazine, “Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness . . . . What a feeling is this for a writer to be able to inspire, and what a reward to reap!” Linked here are images of the binding and of Leech’s illustration of Marley’s ghost appearing to the dyspeptic Scrooge.

John Leech, Fezziwig’s Ball
A beautiful reproduction of Leech’s famous frontispiece for A Christmas Carol, from the luxurious Nonesuch Press edition of Dickens’s works, published in the 1930s.

Publishing Details on A Christmas Carol
The book was officially published on December 19, 1843, and by Christmas Eve, five days later, it had already sold six thousand copies, at three shillings and sixpence each. As Robert Patten has shown in Dickens and
his publishers, the production costs for the book’s decorative presentation were much greater, and Dickens’s share of the books profit was much smaller, than he had initially hoped. According to Patten’s figures, of the total production costs of £855, only £74 were for printing, and £89 for paper, while £194 went for illustrations (£120 for the hand-coloring) £180 on binding, and £314 on publisher’s commission and advertising. Total receipts were £992, leaving a balance for Dickens himself of £137 after expenses. But he published the book on commission, retaining copyright, and its long-term popularity more than made up for the (relative) short-term disappointment.
CHARLES DICKENS CONTINUED

Following up *A Christmas Carol*
Displayed together here are the four subsequent Christmas books that Dickens produced during the 1840s: *The Chimes*, 1844; *The Battle of Life*, 1846; *The Cricket on the Hearth*, 1846; and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, 1848. In format, Dickens stuck closely to the successful pattern he had established with *A Christmas Carol*, and later the books would often be reprinted together, as a group. In content and theme, however, he avoided repetition. *The Chimes* mounts a fierce attack on the Utilitarian social policies of the hungry forties, and later Christmas books became increasingly dark in tone.

---


---

The Cratchit Family Christmas
Charles Dickens, *A Christmas carol.*
Illustrated by A. C. Michael.
New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910. Salesman's dummy, original green cloth.

---

Christmas with the Poor
Broadsheet advertisement for *A Christmas Carol*, 1844
This stage adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* by Edward Stirling, opening at the Theatre Royal, Adelphi, on February 5 1844, was advertised as sanctioned by Dickens, to distinguish it from C.Z.Barnett’s competing production, *A Christmas Carol: or, the Miser’s Warning!*, which opened the same night at the Surrey Theatre, home of early Victorian melodrama. Charles Dickens

Cheap editions such as this attest to the widening impact and sustained popularity of Dickens’s book.

All of the Christmas books were rapidly transferred to the stage. This dramatization, based on “early Proofs, . . . by express permission of the Author,” was scripted even before the book itself was published. Smith, drama critic for the *Illustrated London News*, would later become famous for his monologue “The Ascent of Mont Blanc.” Opening at the Adelphi in London in December 1845, productions were running at ten other London theatres and uncountable provincial ones.

Following the breakup of his marriage in 1859, Dickens founded a new periodical to replace the unfortunately-named *Household Words*, but continued the practice of editing (and often largely writing himself) a special “Extra Christmas Number.” Displayed here is a complete set of Dickens’s Christmas stories for *All the Year Round*, in the original blue wrappers. Like most of Dickens’s later Christmas writings, they eschew the focus on happy family Christmas traditions that his earlier writings had done so much to establish.
Pip’s Christmas dinner, from *Great Expectations* (December 1861)

The most famous of Dickens’s later treatments of Christmas, the pre-Christmas installment of one of his best-known novels when it was serialized in *All the Year Round*, depicts the orphan Pip, stuffed against the sharp corner of a crowded Christmas table among distant relatives he already dislikes, anxiously waiting his irascible sister’s discovery that her prize pie has gone missing from the larder. This illustration is from a contemporary American edition of the novel.