

Charles Dickens, Dundee and Hard Times

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The Christmas period has its own popular book, film version and ghost story all in one - the evergreen *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, an allegory on the redemption of a greedy man who redistributes his wealth to the less fortunate.

Dickens is regarded as one of Britain's greatest writers, and 2012 will see many events to mark the 200th anniversary of the author's birth.

His fame is such that he is one of the few writers with an adjective named after him to describe a social condition - "Dickensian"

In October 1858 Dickens visited Dundee and gave a public reading of *A Christmas Carol* in Dundee .

The Dundee Advertiser reported :

"On Friday night Mr Charles Dickens gave his first reading – the *Christmas Carol* –in the Exchange Hall, Bank Street, in presence of a very large and fashionable audience, who had met to see and hear the most popular novelist of the day."

After a two-hour reading,

"Mr Dickens concluded amid loud applause."

Lenin, on the other hand, was far less praiseworthy.

George Orwell tells that " the story was read to Lenin on his deathbed and according to his wife, he found its 'bourgeois sentimentality' completely intolerable. "

However, Karl Marx declared that Dickens " issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together."

Dickens' novels highlight the plight of those failed by Victorian society and who were pre-destined for the workhouse, the debtor's prison, begging, squalor, and endless hours of spirit-breaking toil in the mills.

Dickens was not , of course, the only observer of the dire straits of the poor.

Below is an extract from a local book, written in 1850 by James Myles, a contemporary Dundonian, called Chapters in the life of a Dundee factory boy: an autobiography..

His minimalist prose tells simply but effectively how child labour left its lifetime mark.

"When I went to a spinning mill, I was about 7 years of age, I had to get up out of bed at 5 o'clock, commence work at half-past five, drop at nine for breakfast ,begin again at half past nine, work until two which was the dinner hour, start again at half-past two , and continue till half-past seven at night.

"However, although these hours were long, they only made up the working day

In reality, there were no regular working hours, masters and managers did with us as they liked.

"The working conditions were unhealthy.

"About a week after I became a mill boy, I was seized by a strong heavy sickness that few escape on becoming mill workers

" The cause of the illness which is known as 'mill fever' is the pestiferous atmosphere produced by so many breathing in a confined space together with the heat and exhalations of grease and oil.

"This fever is slow and dull, and painfully wearisome in its operation.

"It produces a pale sallow and debilitated look, destroys rosy cheeks , and unless the constitution be very strong , leaves its pale impress for life. "

However, whereas people such as Myles sought fact to make their case for the betterment of conditions, Dickens sought fiction, through his novels instead.

In *Hard Times*, published in 1854, Dickens describes how the massive changes wrought by the industrial revolution had fashioned the fictional "Coketown" and the lives of its people.

He wrote,

" It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all daylong, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next..... So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power. It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions."

Hard Times has been regarded by some as an indictment of laissez-faire capitalism.

George Orwell was less persuaded, saying "its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious....if men would behave decently the world would be decent."

Dickens provided a vivid analysis of the troubles of society, but didn't suggest a collective, political remedy.

Personal changes in behaviour were his solution rather than whole-scale political and structural changes in society.

Dickens was no paragon of virtue himself.

In his private life, he became progressively detached from his wife of 22 years who had borne him 10 children and who had suffered several miscarriages.

They separated in 1858, with Dickens somehow regarding his wife as responsible for him having to support so many children financially and for her "lack of energy" as well.

What Orwell said about Dickens' attitudes to capitalists certainly applies to Dickens himself – "if men would behave decently the world would be decent."

Dickens' time was an era of extreme poverty judged by its standards of drinking water, provision of food, sanitation, health, housing, literacy and education, and information

Yet, the poor were regarded by many of the comfortable classes as the source of their own predicament, an undeserving, feckless underclass on whom philanthropy and public money would be wasted.

Dickens viewed his novels as the best means to attack such beliefs and to rouse the conscience with stories of the unscrupulous ill-treatment and subjugation of the lives of his memorable characters pitted against a backdrop of glaring class inequalities.

And with his books being so popular, their message could not be easily dismissed.

If Dickens had been our Ghost of Christmas Present what would he be asking us to confront morally in what are today indeed hard times?

His great-great grandson, Gerald Dickens, is in no doubt.

He has said that the present day issue of bankers' bonuses "sums up A Christmas Carol in a nutshell".

As we know today, appeals against selfishness calling for changes in the personal behaviour of bonus-wealthy individuals, as Dickens would have favoured, have been shown not to work.

There has to be legislation by Government to achieve this, just as progressive thinkers after Dickens' time advocated government intervention in implementing programmes for improvements in health, housing, education and employment.

However, none of this detracts from Dickens' ability to remind those in authority of their moral responsibility towards those they employed.

He never had to look far for his evidence of the need for that accountability as this contemporary incident from Dundee shows :

In 1846 the case of "Six unfortunate and unprotected factory girls of Dundee" between the ages of 14 and 20 employed as flax-spinners in Baxter's mills reached Parliament.

40 women in the mill had seen other workers in the same flat as themselves awarded a three pennies a week increase in wages and, not unnaturally, the women had asked for a similar rise.

Their request was refused, and they took the afternoon off for recreation as others at the mill sometimes did..

The rules of the mill meant that they could expect a fine of time and a half deduction from their wages.

However, on returning to work next day, they were detained in a room by four men , kept there till noon, whereupon they were marched through the streets of Dundee to another private room where waited a magistrate, a member of the Baxter family and the mill manager.

The six women then signed a paper which was then used against them duplicitously as a "confession"

The magistrate sentenced the six factory girls to ten days' imprisonment with hard labour.

The matter was raised in Parliament with a call for a select committee to be set up" complaining of the illegal Trial and Imprisonment of Jane Bennett and other Factory Girls", but it was voted down.

Web links

Dickens 2012

<http://www.dickens2012.org>

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<http://www.marlynglen.org.uk>