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**The Founder of the Feast?
 Dickens and Christmas**

Professor Michael Slater MBE

A favourite anecdote, much beloved by Dickensians, is the one about the little girl in Covent Garden who, in 1870, hearing that Dickens had died, said, “Oh, Dickens is dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?” and this identification of Dickens with Christmas, which is now so deeply inscribed in Anglo-American popular culture, leads I think to the often repeated notion that he more or less invented Christmas as we now practise it, which is the question that I have posed in my title. This is erroneous I think, except in one very important respect, which I will try to clarify.

The traditional old Christmas celebrations were suppressed by the Puritans during the Commonwealth period, but they were gradually revived, especially in rural areas, during the 18th Century, or the early 19th Century. This had a lot to do with Tory nostalgia for the good old days, and also with the taste developing in the early 19th Century for the picturesque, for colourful traditions and ceremonies, but the thing that really got it going was Sir Walter Scott’s poem, “Marmion”, which was published in 1812, and this features a long description of Christmas in the Baron’s Hall in olden times, describing various games, festivities, the consumption of the boar’s head, the yule logs and the carols. Scott was of course enormously popular, so he was very, very widely read, and this description of Christmas in the Baron’s Hall seized the public imagination.

One product of it was a famous painting, by Daniel Maclise, Dickens’ very close friend, which was shown to the public in 1842 and was a wide-angle lens painting of “Merry Christmas in the Baron’s Hall”, and it was highly popular, much reproduced, and the great thing about it was that it showed all classes of society, servants and masters, feasting together, playing Christmas games and so on.

What really got Christmas going for the English was an American called Washington Irving; of “Sleepy Hollow” fame. Washington Irving was well-established as an American writer who came to live in England in 1815, and stayed for five years, during which time he visited Scott. He published, in 1819, a volume called “The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent”, which included a description of Christmas festivities at an imagined country house in England called Bracebridge Hall, where the Squire of Bracebridge Hall was very, very keen, to say the least, on old Christmas customs and the revival of them, and his description of Christmas at Bracebridge Hall was certainly known very well to Dickens and greatly influenced Dickens. In fact, the Christmas scenes in “Pickwick Papers” are a straight imitation of it. The essential thing about Christmas at Bracebridge Hall is all the generations of the family, far-flung cousins and so forth, all together, with the servants - Bracebridge Hall is a country house, you see - for a Christmas dinner, which is all very traditional, with the boar’s head. There are plenty of mince-pies, plenty of mistletoe around, and the games that are played, especially the game of blind man’s bluff, which became the sort of traditional Victorian Christmas celebration. In fact, it is interesting that Dickens, in “The Christmas Carol”, actually pinches a whole scene from Washington Irving’s “Bracebridge Hall”. This is describing the game of blind man’s bluff, when a particularly amorous young gentleman is pursuing a young lady, and although he is blindfolded, he seems to know where she is all the time, and he is always pursuing her around, and you have got this episode in “The Christmas Carol” and it comes directly from Washington Irving.

It is very comic. I am not quite sure how comic Washington Irving intended it to be, that Squire Bracebridge is very anxious that he should get all the rituals right, and he is always going off and consulting a book as to know exactly what you do about the boar’s head, exactly how you play blind man’s bluff, and so on, because he is very anxious that everything should be done according to tradition, as he laments that British peasants have “…broken asunder from the higher classes and seem to think their interests are separate – they begin to read newspapers…” and he is trying to counteract this rising tide of democracy.

There is no doubt that Dickens’ only family, headed by the convivial John Dickens, his father, would, despite all their economic difficulties from time to time, have kept a very merry Christmas.

Dickens’s first actual discussion or presentation of Christmas in print appears in a magazine called “Bell’s Life in London”, and this was on 27th December 1835, when he describes a middle-class family in London celebrating Christmas at the abode of a favourite uncle and aunt. The boar’s head has now become a turkey, but there is still the “glorious game”, as he puts it, of blind man’s bluff is played. The essay begins, in anticipation I suppose of Scrooge, “That man must be a misanthrope indeed, in whose breast something like jovial feeling is not roused, in whose mind some pleasant associations are not awakened by the recurrence of Christmas.” There is a mention of death too, “One little seat may be empty”, looking forward to Tiny Tim, but rather bluffly, then Dickens goes on to say, “Dwell not upon the past! Reflect upon your present blessings.” So, this first presentation of Christmas by Dickens is a very bourgeois celebration, which is, as it were, Bracebridge Hall adapted to a middle-class London family, and this is the first time that Dickens writes about Christmas and it is an entirely well-established way.

Then we come to what he calls the “good-humoured Christmas chapter” of “Pickwick Papers”. “Pickwick Papers” was published as a monthly serial, and halfway through, the tenth part of the 20 numbers, was published on 27th December 1835, and this describes the Christmas festivities at Manor Farm in the country, Mr Wardle’s country house, and Dickens is very much copying “Bracebridge Hall”. Even the stagecoach ride down to Dingley Dell is from “Bracebridge Hall”, though Dickens does contribute the famous scene of Mr Pickwick sliding on the ice, and the even funnier spectacle of Mr Winkle sliding on the ice and falling about all over the place. Sam Weller has to keep him up – he says, “These skates are very awkward” and Sam Weller says, “Well, there is an awkward gentleman in them which is the problem!” and then there is that wonderful scene where all the ladies are urging Mr Pickwick to slide, and he says, “My goodness, I haven’t done such a thing since I was a boy!” and this whole idea of reverting to childhood games and so on is very central to the Washington Irving/Dickens’ Christmas, and Mr Pickwick does solemnly slide a few yards down the ice, and that is often chosen for Christmas cards these days – I see that and the stagecoach of course.

But, interesting there is all the Washington Irving feasting and dancing and flirtation and with this large, extended family and all the servants, but the poor relations are rather figures of fun. They just try to oblige everybody. In blind man’s bluff, for instance, they caught the people who they thought would like it, and when the game flagged, they got caught themselves. There are rather comic supernumeraries, which is very different obviously from the presentation of the poor in the Christmas books, “The Christmas Carol” especially. But what is very, very interesting, from the point of view of the immortal “Christmas Carol”, is the story that is told by the Parson, because of course telling stories around the Christmas fire was again something that derives from Washington Irving, preferably ghost stories, and Dickens has the old clergyman in “Pickwick Papers”, telling “The Tale of Gabriel Grub” or “The Goblins who Stole a Sexton”.

Gabriel Grub was a miserable old misanthrope – he was a gravedigger and he very much liked his trade. He particularly enjoyed practising it on Christmas Eve, and he did not speak to anybody. He chased boys away. His great consolation was his bottle of gin, and he liked nothing better than digging a grave on Christmas Eve in a solitary churchyard, accompanied only by his bottle of gin, and he hates everybody. But then he is visited by these goblins, who show him a series of visions, which they are showing him visions of the forerunners really of the Cratchits, as the goblin said this:

*“A thick cloud which had obscured the further end of the cavern rolled gradually away and disclosed, apparently at a great distance, a small and scantily furnished, but neat and clean apartment. A crowd of little children were gathered round a bright fire, clinging to their mother’s gown and gambolling round her chair. The mother occasionally rose and drew aside the window curtain, as if to look for some expected object. A frugal meal was ready, spread upon the table, and an elbow-chair placed near the fire. A knock was heard at the door. The mother opened it and the children crowded round her and clapped their hands for joy as their father entered. He was wet and weary and shook the snow from his garments as the children crowded round him and seized his cloak, hat, stick and gloves with busy zeal and ran with them from the room. He sat down to his meal before the fire, the children climbed about his knee, and the mother sat by his side, and all seemed happiness and comfort. But a change came upon the view, almost imperceptibly. The scene was altered to a small bedroom, where the fairest and youngest child lay dying. The roses had fled from his cheek and the light from his eye, and even as the Sexton – Gabriel Grub – looked upon him with an interest he’d never felt or known before, he died. His young brothers and sisters crowded round his little bed and seized his tiny hand, so cold and heavy, but they shrunk back from his touch and looked with awe on his infant face for, calm and tranquil as it was, and sleeping in rest and peace as the beautiful child seemed to be, they saw that he was dead and they knew that he was an angel looking down upon them, blessing them from a bright and happy heaven.”*

This, in the inset tale in “Pickwick Papers”, is clearly looking forward to Tiny Tim in “The Christmas Carol”, Tiny Tim of course who does not die, and Gabriel Grub is made to see a whole series of visions. The goblins are kicking him hard all the time and they are showing him these things of poor people suffering great hardship, and yet united by family love and celebrating Christmas as best they can. But then, Dickens does not really do anything with that. We do not know really what effect it had on Gabriel Grub because he simply disappears and is not seen again, so whether this has had a good effect on him or not, we do not know, but you can see how it later gave Dickens an idea for the great classic “The Christmas Carol”, except that here, actually, in this forerunner of “The Carol”, Tiny Tim really does die.

Then you have an episode in April 1840, in the magazine he was running called “Master Humphrey’s Clock”, in which the hero, or the main character, Master Humphrey, who is an elderly, rather reclusive cripple, on Christmas Day, he goes to a rather deserted tavern, where he finds a solitary man who is in this rather bleak situation, with nobody else there, “a bough of mistletoe sickening in the gas and parched sprigs of holly”, and this man is brooding over past – they are not specified but obviously some disappointments in his children or disappointment in love earlier in life, but he is brooding on the past, and on past wrongs and sorrows, and very much looking forward to Dickens’ last Christmas book, “The Haunted Man”. Master Humphrey befriends him, offers sympathy and companionship, and transforms this very bleak Christmas that the man was having into one of friendship.

It was really in “Gabriel Grub” that you begin to see the huge difference that Dickens did make with “The Christmas Carol” and the Christmas books in general. Robert Louis Stevenson is responding to that I think when he wrote to a friend: “I wonder if you’ve ever read Dickens’ Christmas books? They are too much perhaps. I have only read two yet, but I have cried my eyes out and had a terrible fight not to sob, but oh dear God, they are good and I feel so good after them, and I shall do good and lose no time! I want to go out and comfort someone! I shall give money! Oh, what a jolly thing it is for a man to have written books like these and just fill people’s hearts with pity!” That interesting reaction of course is what a lot of people have and had to “The Carol”, and you get, as I say, the first glimpse of that in “The Tale of Gabriel Grub”.

But so far, Dickens had not made much connection – I mean, Gabriel Grub is shown the poor being very brave and loving towards each other, coping with poverty and even with death, but he had not really connected this with the contemporary political or social world. But by 1843, he had become increasingly disturbed, and one could say even horrified, by the state of the poor. This was, after all, the Hungry ‘40s. He spoke in a speech at the Manchester Athenaeum in October 1843 about “…thousands of immortal creatures condemned, without alternative or choice, to tread not what our great poet calls “the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire” but one of jagged flints and stones, laid down by brutal ignorance”. He had visited a ragged school, one of those schools that had been set up in London and other great cities to try and give some basic education to the children on the streets. He had read and been horrified by, like many other middle-class writers, middle-class generally but I am thinking of Elizabeth Barrett and her famous poem called “The Cry of the Children”, he had read these parliamentary reports of the Children’s Employment Commission, one on mines and manufacturer, and it is the mines and manufacturers one that particularly got him, and he was horrified by the revelations of the appalling conditions in which very, very small children were made to work in these industries. He thought, he said, of writing a pamphlet called “An Appeal on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child”, but then he suddenly has an inspiration, maybe remembering the story of Gabriel Grub. He thinks, no, he is not going to write a pamphlet, he will write something that will have “ten thousand times the force”, he says, of any pamphlet, the story that he has conceived very suddenly as it seems. He is in the middle of writing a long novel, “Martin Chuzzlewit”, but he describes composing “The Christmas Carol”. I mean, he must be vaguely remembering “Gabriel Grub” and he talks about walking about “the blackened streets of London” all night, creating, thinking of “The Carol”, getting tremendously excited about it. He was in this tremendous state of excitement, which he describes wonderfully, walking about what he calls “the blackened streets of London”, weeping and laughing and conceiving of, making up, “The Carol”, which was then published just after Christmas. It was a beautiful little book, but very expensively produced, four hand-coloured plates by John Leech, a special beautiful binding and so forth, and published at a price of five shillings, which of course was enormously expensive! It sold like hotcakes, but it sold to the middle and upper-middle classes. It was beyond the pocket of most working-class people.

But it had an enormous effect. Thackeray, for instance, described it as “a national benefit and a personal kindness to every man and woman who reads it”. The Judge, Lord Jeffrey, who was a great admirer, a great friend of Dickens, said that this little book had done “more good than all the sermons preached from all the pulpits in England over Christmas”. And of course, there were some objections. The Westminster Review, which went in for political economy, was rather critical and said “Who went without turkey and punch in order that Bob Cratchit might get them?” is kept out of sight by Dickens, because unless there were enough turkeys and punch to go round, somebody was going without. Dickens got his revenge on that in Mr Filer, the political economist in the next Christmas book, “The Chimes”, but that is really another story.

It was, and has remained, probably the most popular of all Dickens’ writings, and this has to do I suppose primarily with the figure of Scrooge, this amazing character, with his name compounded of “gouge” and “screw”, who has this wonderful vitality of malice, as it were, so much so that Chesterton said he was sure it was all an act, G. K. Chesterton, one of the great Dickens’ critics, and said that he was sure that Scrooge had been secretly giving away turkeys all his life. One can sort of see why he thought that…

I mean, the very name of course is wonderful, the combination of “screw” and “gouge”, and the contrast between Scrooge, the solitary, really mean figure, and the Cratchit family, this warm, loving, mutually devoted family, is at the heart of “The Christmas Carol”. It is his ghost story for Christmas, so he uses the device of the three ghosts, the three spirits of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet To Come, and Scrooge is taken back into his past and made to remember sorrows that he had had to endure as a neglected child, left at school when everybody else has gone home for the holidays, when he is made to see, in the past, himself getting harder and harder, having the relationship with the woman he was going to marry broken off because she says he is getting too fond of money, and he is made to feel pity for his former self – “Scrooge sat down upon a bench in the schoolroom and wept to see his former self” as he used to be. What he has sealed off completely, his past, he does not ever think about it, he has made to revisit it, and then, in the next spirit, the Spirit of Christmas Present, shows him the Cratchit family and how loving they are and how much care they take for crippled Tiny Tim, and what a very hard struggle they have to get a living, let alone make a Christmas dinner, and yet, for all that, Mrs Cratchit does make a triumphant Christmas dinner. Scrooge is particularly interested by the plight of Tiny Tim, and asks the Ghost of Christmas Present if the child will live, and the Ghost of Christmas Present tells him that it is very unlikely, given the family’s very poor circumstances. Scrooge is shown other pathetic scenes and so on, so he begins to be moved by another emotion very foreign to him, by pity, and so, first nostalgia, then pity, and then, finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, this terrifying ghost that does not speak, this black-hooded ghost that shows him his horrible solitary death, with the attendants robbing the bed-curtains and the very shirt that he was going to be buried in, and he is made to go to the rank churchyard where his tombstone is, and made, in other words, thoroughly afraid. I mean, psychologically, it is very convincing, this conversion by pity, by nostalgia, pity and fear, and the amazing relationship that Dickens sets up in “The Carol” between you, the reader, and himself. I mean, when he says at one point “I’m as close to you as if I was standing at your elbow” and you do have that sense of Dickens talking directly to you, it is, of course, a masterpiece.

People sometimes do not notice the carol itself. It is quite interesting, it is called “The Christmas Carol” and there is a carol referred to in it. I mean, when the child tries to sing the Christmas carol through Scrooge’s keyhole of the office and Scrooge seizes the office ruler and chases him away, and what the child sings is “God Bless You, Merry Gentleman, May Nothing You Dismay”, where Dickens is adapting the words of “God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen, Let Nothing You Dismay” – “God Rest Ye, Merry”, in other words, just have a good time and so forth, but he changes it to “God Bless You”, and Scrooge refuses the blessing, and is consequently dismayed, and this carol is at the very heart of the story.

It did have a very profound effect on Dickens himself and an enormous, huge success with the public, which was not reflected in the royalties that he got from it, but that was because of the tremendous expense of producing such a beautiful little book.

But here I think is where Dickens breaks right away from Washington Irving and that tradition of reviving good old customs, all classes mingling together in festive sports and pastimes, and brings in – and this is where I think you can say that he invented Christmas, not in the feasts and merriment and so forth and present-giving and feasting and all that, which had been, as I have tried to show, which had been much written about before him, but the connection of Christmas with giving, with being concerned for the poor. As I said, the poor, in “Pickwick Papers”, the poor relations are really just a joke, and Squire Bracebridge is not really concerned about the poor outside his gates, whereas the urgent message of “The Christmas Carol”, the one that Louis Robert Stevenson is responding to is that the need for charity, for concern for the poor, and for giving, and I think that that Dickens did, this locking together of the idea of Christmas as being a time, above all, when one should open one’s pocket and be charitable to people less well off than oneself. That, I think, is Dickens’ big contribution to Christmas as we celebrate it now.

He wrote four more Christmas books. So huge was the success of “The Carol” that of course his publishers, and indeed the public, more or less demanded a successor, and he wrote four more Christmas books, but, apart from the last one, they are very different from “The Carol”. They all have to do with memory, but very little to do actually with Christmas. The second one, “The Chimes”, is a ferocious polemic, the story of some bells that rang a New Year in, which does actually present the reader with the real desperation of the poor, the exploitation of sweated labour, prostitution, rick-burning, the agricultural labourers driven to desperation and burning the farmers’ ricks. It was quite a shock, coming after “The Carol”, not the kind of thing people were expecting, and by far the most radical thing that Dickens wrote, but really, nothing much to do with Christmas, and it produced such a storm of controversy because, as I say, it was extremely radical, that he retreated with the next Christmas book, “The Cricket on the Hearth”, which is, as he calls it, a fairytale of home, which is not very much connected with Christmas, certainly does not feature the poor at all.

But the last Christmas book, “The Haunted Man” or “The Ghost’s Bargain”, does return to the idea of memory and the part it can play in the moral life. The haunted man is actually one of only two professors I think who feature. The other one is the late Professor Dingo of European reputation, who is the geologist and was the second husband of Mrs Bayham Badger in “Bleak House”, but that is aside! This Professor, who is taken much more seriously, is a Professor of Chemistry, as far as one can make out, but above all, he is a man haunted by a sense of wrong and sorrow, as Dickens himself was haunted by – he was just coming up to writing “David Copperfield”, this was in 1849, when he does begin to examine his own past and his sense of his resentment and betrayal and the suffering of his boyhood, the blacking factory, etc. etc. and so “The Haunted Man” is, in some sense, Dickens himself, who is continually brooding on wrongs that have been done to him, friends who have betrayed him – well, this is not Dickens himself actually there, but, basically, Redlaw, the main character of the story, broods over wrongs and sorrows, and then this phantom of himself appears, and offers to expunge all memory of wrong and sorrow so that he cannot remember this anymore. The unforeseen consequence, of that for him is that he does not any longer have any sense of fellow feeling with other human beings. When he is confronted with the savage child of the streets, he feels nothing but repulsion, no sorrow or pity for the child, in the way that Scrooge, confronted with the wolfish children, Ignorance and Want, the more or less allegorical children in “The Christmas Carol”, is horrified and asks “Have they no refuge or resource?” and so on, and of course is answered with his own terrible words that they had better die and decrease the surplus population. But in “The Haunted Man”, Redlaw has no feeling whatever about this barbaric street child that he encounters because, along with the expunging of his memory of all wrong and sorrow, is expunged, as Dickens puts it, “all good imagination gone”. He can no longer imagine what it is like to be anybody else, and this terrible gift which has been given to him, and which I suppose sometimes Dickens himself must have longed for, that he should not continue to be tormented by memories of the blacking factory, by memories of his mother being keen for him to be sent back, bitter memories of the way in which he was treated by Maria Beadnell, etc. He might have wished all that he did not have to constantly remember, as he obviously did, but in this book, “The Haunted Man”, which, if you have not read it, you really should. It is a marvellous piece of writing, and coming just between “The Carol” and “David Copperfield” is absolutely fascinating. It does have plenty of snow and winter setting and carols and so forth, and ends with a great feast in the college hall where the Professor teaches, so it is a very Christmassy book, but, as I say, very interesting, coming just before “David Copperfield”.

But it was the last Christmas book that Dickens wrote. After that, he was engaged with “David Copperfield” of course, and then he began a weekly magazine, “Household Words”, which he started in 1850, and it was obviously a good idea to produce some kind of Christmas number – it was certainly expected of him – so that, for the whole run of this journal, until 1859, and then for its successor, another weekly journal called “All the Year Round”, which he was still editing at his death, there was always a special Christmas number which had all kinds of different stories in it, but which did not necessarily relate to Christmas. Dickens said to all the people that he invited to contribute to these numbers that their stories need have no reference whatever to Christmas, but he would like them to strike what he called “the chord of the season”, that is something to do with reconciliation, something to do with confronting and dealing with the past, or past wrongs and sorrows and so on, but they need not be specifically about Christmas.

I do want to mention the first one though, which was in 1850, it was called “A Christmas Tree”. As you probably know, the Christmas tree, which certainly does not feature in “The Christmas Carol”, but it was introduced into England in 1841 by Prince Albert, and Dickens refers to it as “a pretty German toy” in this wonderful essay called “A Christmas Tree”. It is not really a Christmas story, it is an essay, and Dickens looks back into his – he is looking at this Christmas tree and all the children assembled round the Christmas tree, and he looks into the topmost branches, and there he sees his earliest Christmas memories of various toys and stories and so forth, and then he comes down through the branches to the present. I will just quote a little bit of it. It is one of the most wonderful things, and if you have not read it, do find it. It is called “A Christmas Tree”. It says:

*“Good for Christmastime is the ruddy colour of the cloak in which the tree, making a forest of itself for her to trip through with her basket, Little Red Riding Hood comes to me one Christmas Eve to give me information of the cruelty and treachery of that dissembling wolf who ate her grandmother, without making any impression on his appetite, and then ate her, after making that ferocious joke about his teeth. She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss, but it was not to be, and there was nothing for it but to look out the wolf in the Noah’s Arc there and put him late in the procession on the table, as a monster who was to be degraded. Oh, the wonderful Noah’s Arc! It was found not seaworthy when put in a washing tub, and the animals were crammed in at the roof and needed have their legs well shaken down before they could be got in even then, but then, ten to one, they began to tumble out of the door, which was but imperfectly fastened with a wire latch, but what was that against it? Consider the noble fly, a size or two smaller than the elephant, the ladybird, the butterfly, all triumphs of art. Consider the goose, whose feet were so small and whose balance so indifferent that he usually tumbled forward and knocked down all the animal creations.”*

And so he goes on, and then later, remembering from these toys, he goes on to the wonderful “Arabian Knights”: *“Oh, now, all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me! All lamps are wonderful. All rings are talismans. Common flowerpots are full of treasure, with a little earth scattered on the top. Trees are for Ali Baba to hide in. Beef steaks are to throw down into the valley of diamonds, that the precious stones may stick to them and be carried by the eagles to their nests. Tarts are made according to the recipe of the Vizier’s son of Bussorah, who turned pastry cook after he was set down in his drawers at the gate of Damascus.”* And so on and so… It is a great flow of detailed reminiscence about the Arabian Knights, which of course was one of Dickens’ favourite reading as a child and a great passion and inspiration for him throughout his literary life.

So, “A Christmas Tree” is a great celebration of all his Christmas memories, coming from the earliest memories of toys and so on, coming right down to the present, but after that, they tended to be stories rather than an essay, as this was. What Dickens did was to get other people, notably Wilkie Collins, Mrs Gaskell, fellow writers, to contribute to the number, and he, thinking of his beloved “Arabian Knights”, which would have an overarching story and then lots of stories inserted in it, and he was always trying to find a suitable framework or frame for the Christmas stories, and being very much frustrated because people would send in things that did not seem to fit in at all, but nevertheless, he goes on until 1868 I think, is the last of the Christmas numbers, just two years before he died, when he found that, by this time, there was such a flood of Christmas literature, Christmas books and Christmas magazines and Christmas stories, which of course all had been stimulated originally by the success of “The Christmas Carol”, that Dickens felt that he was just being swamped by imitators and almost plagiarists and so on, and so he was not any longer going to produce a Christmas number. But all the stories that he did include, he tried to ensure struck that “chord of the season”, as he called it.

As regards his novels, I mean, after 1851, he did not write specifically about Christmas in any of the novels, apart from two examples, and they are rather interesting ones. I mean, the terribly uncomfortable Christmas in “Great Expectations”, which is so excruciating for Pip – you remember, he is rather tormented by his intelligent sister and by Mr Wopsle and the Hubbles. I think it is Mr Wopsle who says something about why boys are so awful, and Mr Hubbles says “They’re naturally vicious!” I think, and you remember, poor Joe is always trying to give him some more gravy to console him at this very grim Christmas feast. And the great contrast between that of course is Pip giving food to the convict out on the marshes and treating him really, though he is frightened of him, treating him like a human being, saying “I hope you enjoy the food, Sir” and so on, which Magwitch is so astonished by, by being treated as a human being, but Dickens is making the contrast between this ghastly Christmas dinner which is just an excuse for the display of vanity and bullying, and the real giving of food and ceremony with Pip and the convict.

Then you have a Christmas scene in his last novel, “Edwin Drood”, but here, Christmas Eve in Cloisterham is described in very unenthusiastic terms, or rather mocking terms: *“An unusual air of gallantry and dissipation is abroad, evinced in an immense bunch of mistletoe hanging in the greengrocer’s shop doorway, and a pool little Twelfth Cake, culminating in the figure of a harlequin, such a very poor little Twelfth Cake that one would rather call it a Twenty-Fourth Cake or a Forty-Eighth Cake, to be raffled for at the pastry-cook’s, terms one shilling per member. Public amusements are not wanting. The waxworks, which made so deep an impression on the reflective mind of the Emperor of China, are to be seen by particular desire during Christmas week only, on the premises of the bankrupt livery stable keeper up the lane, and a new grand comic Christmas pantomime is to be produced at the theatre, the latter heralded by the portrait of Signor Jacksonini, the clown, saying “How do you do tomorrow?”, quite as life, and almost as miserably.”*  I mean, the description is hardly of “The Christmas Carol” variety!

But Dickens himself continued, whatever he did about it in his novels, he continued to love Christmas and Christmastime and he kept it up, as is plentifully described in his elder daughter Mamie’s little book in 1896, which has a whole chapter on Christmas, the Christmas revels at Gad’s Hill, and as she says, *“He loved to emphasise Christmas in every possible way.”* So, although he had ceased writing about Christmas, except with these two rather doleful examples of the Christmas dinner in “Great Expectations” and the rather miserable Christmas festivities in Cloisterham, he no longer wrote about it in his fiction, but he continued to celebrate it in his life, in his family, and, as she said, he loved Christmas for its *“…deep significance, as well as for its joys, and this he demonstrates in every allusion in his writings to the great festival, a day which he considered should be fragrant with the love we should bear to each other and with the love and reference of his Saviour and Master”*. Now, that, of course, that reference to the religious aspect of Christmas is what a lot of people were keen to point out, that Dickens does not really allude to this aspect of the festival at all, to the religious significance of it, that he’s much, much more concerned with social issues, with the poor and so on, and perhaps Mamie, his daughter, when writing that, was conscious of such critics as Ruskin, John Ruskin, whose verdict was that, for Dickens, Christmas was “no more than mistletoe and pudding, neither resurrection from the dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds”. In fact, all these do figure in the “Children’s New Testament”, commonly called now “The Life of Our Lord”, which Dickens wrote for his children, but they also are much more present in his writings than Ruskin would allow.

And I want to end by quoting what I think is a very beautiful part, the end to I think it is the second of the special Christmas numbers, which is called “The Seven Poor Travellers”, and Dickens goes to Watts’ charity in Rochester, which has been set up to give money and shelter to poor travellers for one night, and he feasts them and so on, and then he leaves, and when he is leaving the next morning, he says, he writes this, as he is going through the woods: “The softness of my tread upon the mossy ground and among the brown leaves enhanced the Christmas sacredness by which I felt surrounded. As the whitened stems environ me, I though how the Founder of the time had never raised his benignant hand, save to bless and heal, except in the case of one unconscious tree. By Cobham Hall, I came to the village and the churchyard, where the dead had been quietly buried, in the sure and certain hope which Christmastime inspires. What children could I see at play and not be loving of, recalling who had loved them? No garden that I passed was out of unison with the day, for I remembered that the tomb was in a garden and that she, supposing him to be the gardener, had said, *“Sir, if thou hast borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him and I will go and take him away”. In time, the distant river with the ships came full in view and, with it, pictures of the poor fishermen mending their nets, who arose and followed him, of the teaching of the people from a ship pushed off a little way from the shore by reason of the multitude, of a majestic figure walking on the water in the loneliness of night. My very shadow on the ground was eloquent of Christmas, for did not the people lay their sick where the mere shadows of the men who had heard and seen him might fall as they passed along? And thus Christmas begirt me far and near, until I’d come to Blackheath and walked down the long vista of gnarled old trees in Greenwich Park.”*

That is the kind of reference to the sacred nature of Christmas that people like Ruskin complained was absent in Dickens.

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