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DICKENS' LAST CHRISTMASES

In the early part of 1856, Dickens wrote to Forster about a sumptuous banquet given in his honour in Paris. The dessert was "a far larger plum pudding than ever was seen in Eng'and at Christmas time . . . and called in the carte (carte in a gold frame like a little fish-slice to be handed about) 'Hommage à l'illustre écrivain d'Angleterre'."[1] To pay tribute to the illustrious author with the most English of Christmas symbols was an obvious gesture in the nineteenth century. Since the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, Dickens had been uniquely associated in the popular mind with Christmas, and the succeeding Christmas books and the special holiday issues of his magazines secured this relationship. During the Christmas season, he received numerous gifts of game, flowers and vegetables from people he did not know, but who in some way regarded him as the inventor, the patron saint, or the embodiment of Christmas.[2] On the day Dickens died, the late-Victorian man of letters, Theodore Watts-Dunton, overheard a barrow-girl in Drury Lane asking a friend, "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"[3] The illiterate street-vendor's reaction indicates both the mythical stature of Dickens and the extent to which his association with Christmas had become proverbial.

Recent criticism, focusing on the Veneerings' overloaded and joyless dinner table rather than the Cratchits' humble feast, on the empty marriage of the Dombeys rather than the idyllic one of the Peerybingles in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, has avoided the "beery Christmas-card Dickens"[4] in favour of a more tormented figure. But the holiday side of Dickens is an essential part of the whole which reinforces rather than negates the current conception of his genius. The very fact that Dickens returned again and again to the theme of Christmas, from *Sketches by Boz* at the beginning of his career to the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* more than thirty years later, indicates that it had a more than casual significance for him. Also, the Dickens Christmas is not

the static affair it is usually considered by both admirers and detractors: the symbolic value of Christmas grew in complexity as Dickens' attitude towards the world grew in complexity. Christmas in *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers* is a simple and in many ways thoughtless festivity; the Christmas books, especially the *Carol*, *The Chimes* and *The Haunted Man*, demonstrate a much more highly-charged social consciousness; the later Christmas scenes in *Great Expectations* and *Edwin Drood* mirror Dickens' disillusionment with the hyprocrisy and heartlessness of Victorian society. Christmas became a touchstone of the communal spirit and charity Dickens found lacking in Victorian England, and his attitudes to the feast parallel his general development from the exuberant comedy of the early novels to the more irritable social awareness of the middle works to the final dark novels. As indications of the distance he had travelled since *Pickwick* and the *Carol*, there can be few illustrations more striking than the Christmas scenes which appear in the novels of his final decade.

The Christmas dinner scene in *Great Expectations* is, as George Ford pointed out, an early Dickens feast "turned upside down",[5] but the reversal extends beyond that scene to encompass virtually every mention of the holiday. The Gargerys' Christmas is a detailed and seemingly deliberate reversal of the customary Dickensian celebration which suggests at every turn the ideal from which it deviates. The first similarity with the Christmas books of the 1840s lies in the timing of the novel's appearance. Dickens first conceived the idea for his new novel in September of 1860. In October, faced with the failure of Charles Lever's currently running serial, he suddenly decided that he would begin publishing his book in *All the Year Round* as soon as possible, beginning on the first of December. Accordingly, the first two chapters, which detail Pip's meeting with the convict on Christmas Eve, appeared on December first; the third and fourth chapters, in which Pip feeds Magwitch on the marshes on Christmas morning and attends Mrs. Joe's dinner, appeared on December eighth; the fifth chapter, describing the melancholy search and capture which follow the dinner, appeared on December fifteenth; and the sixth chapter, in which the exhausted Pip is brought home and put to bed, appeared with chapter seven on December twenty-third. In other words, the first six chapters of *Great Expectations*, describing events which take place on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, hark back both in timing of appearance and in subject matter to the seasonal books which had permanently linked Dickens with Christmas.

Superficially the observance of Christmas in *Great Expectations* resembles the early Dickensian Christmases at several points. The day is celebrated with

good clothes, a nominal amount of church-going, the advent of family friends and a festive dinner. But this account wholly distorts the actuality, which is as bleak and frigid as the marshes on which Pip meets the convict.

A comparison with the Cratchits' Christmas, the classic early example, demonstrates how thoroughly Dickens inverted the ideal in the case of the Gargerys. Instead of the Cratchits' anticipation, the holiday simply adds another duty to Pip's already overburdened life. The reader first becomes aware of the season when Pip recalls, "It was Christmas Eve, and I had to stir the pudding for the next day, with a copper-stick, from seven to eight by the Dutch clock" (11).[6] Like Tiny Tim and his father, Pip and Joe attend church on Christmas morning, but unlike the earlier pair the blacksmith and boy go constrained and unhappy. Joe presents "a picture of misery, in a full suit of Sunday penitentia's" and Pip is denied the free use of his limbs in a suit "like a kind of Reformatory" (20). While Tiny Tim welcomed his opportunity to remind the congregation "who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see" (45),[7] Pip is stricken with guilt over the food he has stolen for Magwitch and spends the service worrying about the possibility of sanctuary in the church.

For Mrs. Joe, who "never was polite, unless there was company" (11), Christmas provides an opportunity for impressing her guests rather than rejoicing her family. Unlike Mrs. Cratchit, whose family was much larger and whose means were much smaller, Pip's sister is grudging and bad-tempered. Her Christmas salutation to Pip is, "And where the deuce ha' *you* been?" (19). Because she refuses to have any "formal cramming and busting and washing up now", Pip and Joe are deprived of their regular breakfast and receive their slices as if they were "two thousand troops on a forced march instead of a man and boy at home" (19). Mrs. Joe's passion for cleanliness is uncomfortable and life-denying rather than cosy, and the state parlour which passes the rest of the year shrouded in silver paper is an apt symbol of her mentality.

Her Christmas dinner, attended by the Hubbles, Mr. Wopsle, Uncle Pumblechook and, last and least important, Pip and Joe, furnishes a prime example of what Barbara Hardy calls false ceremony.[8] Mr. Wopsle's theatrical grace, "something like a religious cross of the Ghost in Hamlet with Richard the Third" (22), is a travesty of humble gratitude and the entire dinner is a travesty of a Christmas feast. There are rituals, such as Pumblechook's annual presentation of sherry and port and Mrs. Joe's annual acceptance speech, but they are self aggrandizing and cheerless. There are seasonal novelties, such as Mrs. Joe's unusual animation and the use of the parlour for dessert, but their strangeness and falseness are more forbidding than exciting. Even the

luxurious meal, Mrs. Joe's most obvious bid for status, proves both indigestible, when Pumblechook drinks tar-water for brandy, and insufficient, when the savoury pork pie is nowhere to be found.

As the only child present at the traditional children's feast, Pip should be the centre of loving attention. He is indeed the centre of attention but in his case this consists in being constantly pricked by "moral goads" (22). Mr. Hubble's seasonable conclusion that the young are "Naterally wicious" receives general acclamation and Mrs. Joe launches into a "fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave and I had contumaciously refused to go there" (24). Assailed on all sides for his criminal tendencies, his resemblance to gluttonous swine and his addiction to luxury, Pip's inner burden of guilt increases and he clutches the table leg, his own version of the convict's leg-iron.

Pip's gastronomic fate is in keeping with the meal as a whole: while the guests eat heartily, he is "regaled with the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain" (22). To compensate, Joe spoons extravagant amounts of gravy onto his plate. Dinners like Pip's, long on condiments and short on the main dish, appear in two of the Christmas books. The Cratchits eke out their precious goose with apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, and Mrs. Cratchit, "surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish", boasts that they were unable to finish it. Similarly, the family is determined not to acknowledge the smallness of the pudding: "Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing" (46). In *The Haunted Man*, the Tetterbys' supper appeals more to the imagination than to any grosser organs:

> There might have been more pork on the knucklebone,—which knucklebone the carver at the cook's shop had assuredly not forgotten in carving for previous customers—but there was no stint of seasoning, and that is an accessory dreamily cheating the sense of taste. The pease pudding, too, the gravy and mustard, like the Eastern rose in respect of the nightingale, if they were not absolutely pork, had lived near it; so, upon the whole, there was the flavour of a middle-sized pig (347).

In the *Carol* and *The Haunted Man*, the meals, while not quite adequate, are eaten with enormous relish and they serve to bind the sharers together in

their mutual but unacknowledged poverty. By withholding satiety, Dickens ensures gusto while at the same time emphasizing the scene's pathos. With Pip, the motif receives a disturbing twist. There is no community in his deprivation, no increase in his enjoyment because of the very meagreness of the food. Always strongly sensitive to the consoling and uniting powers of food, in *Great Expectations* Dickens uses food and the manner in which it is dispensed to suggest the presence or absence of human warmth and dignity. At Mrs. Joe's, these qualities are conspicuous in their absence. Pip's sister, whose pin-filled apron denotes her refusal to nourish either physically or spiritually, mauls the bread she cuts for her family, begrudges them their usual breakfast on Christmas and, in a crowning act of denial, stints the child's holiday dinner. The dinner guests pontificate on the swinishness of young boys while stuffing themselves with pork. Pumblechook preens himself on his gifts of food and drink. There is no concord, no true rejoicing at the dinner, and the only charity demonstrated is Joe's treatment of Pip.

As in Shakespeare,[9] broken feasts in Dickens are powerfully emblematic of some failure in human relationships. Mrs. Joe's party is rudely interrupted by soldiers, but they halt a mere shell of festivity. Pip thinks sadly and correctly that their news of the fugitives provides only "a terrible good sauce" for the dinner. "They had not enjoyed themselves a quarter so much before the entertainment was brightened with the excitement (the sergeant) furnished" (29), and a manhunt brings the heartless Christmas to a perfectly appropriate conclusion.

But this is not the only Christmas meal in *Great Expectations*: there is another and equally famous one, although it is not usually associated with Christmas. For all its bizarre circumstances, the breakfast Pip takes to Magwitch on Christmas morning is more in keeping with the spirit of the holiday than his sister's dinner. Although he naturally obeys the fugitive out of fear at first, Pip, as Dickens takes pains to demonstrate, is soon touched by compassion. While Magwitch eats in a ravenous and disagreeable manner, Pip, "(p)itying his desolation", tells him, "I am glad you enjoy it." This moves Magwitch to his own rough courtesy and he answers, "Thankee, my boy. I do." In contrast to Mrs. Joe, whose politeness was assumed only on important occasions, Pip treats the wanted man with particular consideration. When he first diffidently mentions the other man he has seen on the marshes, he hesitates "as to the politeness of making the remark", and when he is forced to mention the man's leg-iron, he is "very anxious to put (it) delicately" (16-17).

The hurried meal on the marshes has profound effects, of course, for

it earns Pip Magwitch's undying gratitude and determines the course of the novel. But even if this were not the case, the contrast it provides with the formal Christmas dinner is particularly instructive. In the earlier meal, the boy and criminal, both in varying degrees outcasts and misfits, effect a genuine human contact with no thought of social status. As the host, Pip far outdoes his sister, for he supplies "hospitality without shows, and ceremony without pride or condescension".[10]

The Christmas scenes in *Great Expectations* form an apt introduction to the themes of status-seeking and snobbery. In the official holiday "set piece", the dinner at Gargerys', Dickens displays nineteenth-century English social aspirations at their worst because they are seen at their most commonplace. The moral of the scene is obvious: when the desire for prestige is stronger than family ties and human affections, Christmas becomes an empty show and a reversal of the cosy feast Victorians had come to expect from Dickens.

The totally unpretentious meal on the marshes offers hope for a relationship based on fraternal charity, but the scene's early promise is all but negated by the powerful forces of Victorian materialism and self-seeking. Pip becomes corrupted by money and prestige and his values as a young man do not differ significantly from those of his sister. Magwitch's love for Pip is real enough, but he uses the boy as an instrument of revenge on the society which rejected him. In the end the two men are reunited, but the conclusion is by no means a resounding and unqualified victory: Magwitch must die, apparently never realizing his mistake, and the mature Pip is a chastened, melancholy figure.

In the world of *Great Expectations*, kindness and unselfishness come easily only to people like Joe, and Joe more than any other character shows what has happened to the old Christmas philosophy. By 1860, there are no Pickwicks to make the servants smile with delight and no reborn Scrooges to bestow turkeys on grateful employees. With benefactors such as these no longer possible, humble, accepting Joe becomes the representative of the Christmas spirit in the novel. His passivity and ineffectuality, however sweet, are ominous signs of Dickens' growing pessimism.

Like *Great Expectations*, at a crucial point in its story *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* focuses on a Christmas which is not only unholidaylike but intimately associated with crime. This undeniable fact proved painful to some readers and in the *Dickensian* of 1918 John Suddaby felt called upon to remind his audience of the long years in which Dickens had "uniformly declared the sanctity of Christmas periods". Suddaby wrote, "When one reads and studies *Edwin Drood* it is clear almost from the first that Dickens intended it to be

a new form of a Christmas story, but differing in size from the smaller Christmas stories which he wrote so effectively during his earlier life."[11] Comforting as his assurance may be, it is implausible to say the least. Not only in time but in essence, *Edwin Drood* is far removed from the early Christmas books.

As befits a mystery story, Dickens' choice of the Christmas season for an uncle's murder of his nephew has never been adequately explained. Unlike *Great Expectations*, the book's appearance was unrelated to the holiday season: the completed portion was published in monthly parts from April to September in 1870. Dickens was writing the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth chapters, which deal with the events of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, during the winter but this hardly seems a sufficient reason for his strange decision. It is always possible that had he lived to finish the book the choice might have been made more clear, but this also seems unlikely. The "strange revulsion of feeling"[12] which caused Dickens to choose Christmas for the murder of Edwin Drood is clarified not by external circumstances but by the spirit of the novel itself. The world in *Edwin Drood* is a world gone oddly wrong, a world where a murder on Christmas has its own symbolic logic.

Christmas in Cloisterham has a strangely modern air, in that Dickens concentrates largely on its commercial aspects. Rather than focusing on family life as usual, the shops and public amusements receive the lion's share of attention:

> Lavish profusion is in the shops: particularly in the articles of currants, raisins, spices, candied peel, and moist sugar. 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 poor 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 pastrycook's, terms one shilling per member. Public amusements are not wanting. The Wax-work which made so deep an impression on the reflective mind of the Emperor of China is 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 large as life, and almost as miserably. (154-155)[13]

As the book's only extended description of the Christmas season, the tawdriness of the scene is noteworthy. Signor Jacksonini is not calculated to inspire merriment, and Dickens deliberately undercuts the holiday amusements with the

unnecessary and deflating mention of the livery-stable-keeper's bankruptcy. There is no extravagant gaiety or delight in the beauty of the provisions, as there was in the shops visited by Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present. The poor little Twelfth Cake strikes a familiar note: it is Dickens' last mention of inadequate food, but here there are no Cratchits or Tetterbys to pretend it suffices. The cake is a commercial proposition to be raffled off to persons unknown.

The few other mentions of Christmas in the novel are almost equally devoid of holiday cheer. Mr. Grewgious' expectations are modest and rather sad; he tells Rosa, "As a particularly Angular man, I do not fit smoothly into the social circle, and consequently I have no other engagement at Christmas-time than to partake, on the twenty-fifth, of a boiled turkey and celery sauce with a—with a particularly Angular clerk I have the good fortune to possess. . . ." (92).

In her holiday farewell to her pupils, Miss Twinkleton refers vaguely to "that festive period at which the first feelings of our nature bounded in our—Miss Twinkleton was annually going to add 'bosoms', but annually stopped on the brink of that expression and substituted 'hearts'. Hearts: our hearts" (143). But Christmas in *Edwin Drood* has very little to do with hearts and fine feelings. In a departure from the Christmastime romances and weddings which appear in *Pickwick* and the annual stories, Rosa and Edwin break their long-standing engagement on the twenty-third of December. Unhappily realizing that he is an "irksome clog" upon the holiday hospitality of Minor Canon Corner, Neville Landless chooses Christmas Day to begin a walking tour (157). His plans never come to fruition, of course, because the book's catastrophe takes place shortly after midnight on Christmas. John Jasper's Christmas Eve dinner party, which promised to be one more in Dickens' string of Christmas reconciliations, ends in murder and Edwin's hopeful words, "the better the day the better the deed" (110), prove tragically untrue.

In *Edwin Drood,* Dickens chooses the day he had been celebrating for more than thirty years as a family holiday for an uncle's murder of his nephew and ward. This contradiction is only one of the most striking in a book filled with contradictions and ironies. The novel begins by highlighting the opposition between John Jasper's official life as the Cathedral organist and choirmaster and his *sub rosa* existence in a London opium den. Although he furnishes the most flagrant example, Jasper is far from alone in his pretenses and duplicity. Mr. Honeythunder, whose name rings with his doubleness, pretends to be a philanthropist while he is actually sadistic and more than a little violent.

Mr. Sapsea erects a monument ostensibly to his wife which in reality is a masterpiece of self-congratulation. Like others in the book, Sapsea is a poser: he "'dresses at' the dean; has been bowed to for the dean, in mistake; has even been spoken to in the street as My Lord, under the impression that he was the Bishop, come down unexpectedly, without his chap'ain" (31). Miss Twinkleton's duplicity is less blameworthy, but with her "two distinct and separate phases of being" (20), she too leads a kind of double life. Even Durdles is "a little misty as to his own identity" and often refers to himself in the third person (37).

For his last novel, Dickens created a world in which things are not as they seem, in which apparent certainties such as the great Cathedral are continually associated with death and decay, and great love is accompanied by powerful destructive urges. James Wright sees in Jasper, English society,

> the society for whom and to whom Dickens wrote. It is a society capable of much feeling, even of love sometimes. But it is also divided against itself; it hides its indifference to women's feelings under fantastic self-adulatory words; it shouts about philanthropy through the voice of Mr. Honeythunder while the small ragamuffins stone the drunken Durdles home after da.k.[14]

It is also a society which failed to heed Dickens' Christmas message of love and communion. To make that society, in the person of John Jasper, guilty of a hideous crime on Christmas Day is merely poetic retribution.

The fact that Christmas figures in Dickens' first and last books, as well as many in between, and that he moves from a clichéd and sentimental view in the *Sketches* to the bold pessimism of *Edwin Drood*, tends to give his development a deceptively gradual appearance. Actually, Dickens' pessimism surfaced relatively early in his Christmas literature, with *The Chimes* in 1844. The *Carol* is the last book in which Dickens convinces himself and his readers that the spirit of Christmas can triumph over the selfishness and divisiveness in England. *The Cricket on the Hearth*, his 1845 attempt to recapture the mood and style of the *Carol*, is an exercise in whistling in the dark which persuades no one, Dickens least of all. The last two Christmas books, *The Battle of Life* (1846) and *The Haunted Man* (1848), apply the message of the season on a much smaller, more personal scale and with particular relevance to Dickens' own life. Similarly, Dickens' contributions to the Christmas issues of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* in the 1850s and 1860s are unconcerned with social problems and the most predominant tone is one of melancholy and loss.

This is not to deny that the Christmases in *Great Expectations* and *Edwin Drood* are powerful expressions of Dickens' disillusionment. They are, and their force is the more striking in that twelve years separate the last Christmas book from *Great Expectations*. In those twelve years Dickens grew increasingly doubtful that the Ghost of Christmas Present would ever reign in England. Even his less optimistic and longer-cherished hope that Christmas could effect change in certain individuals has dimmed in the two novels. Dickens' links with Christmas and the Christmas ideal were almost as strong as the early Dickensians thought, but the association was by no means unvarying. From his early certainty in the power of Christmas he moved to a period of vague anxiety in which personal issues took precedence over larger and more demanding problems. Finally, in the last decade of his life, the touchstone he had used since the *Sketches* seemed hopelessly at variance with the realities of English life. The article in which John Suddaby defended the consistency of *Edwin Drood* was entitled, "Was Dickens a Christmas Renegade?" The answer is clear: England, and not Dickens, was the renegade.

*This article is based on work for a Ph.D. from George Washington University.

NOTES

1. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. A. J. Hoppé (London: Dent, 1969), II, 169.
2. E. Beresford Chancellor, *Dickens and His Times* (London: Richards, 1932), p. 119.
3. Theodore Watts-Dunton, "Dickens and 'Father Christmas'," *Nineteenth Century*, LXII (Dec. 1907), 1016.
4. George Ford, quoted by Edgar Johnson in *Dickens Criticism: A Symposium*, with George Ford, J. Hillis Miller, Sylvère Monod, Noel Peyrouten (Cambridge, Mass.: Charles Dickens Reference Center, 1962), p. 16.
5. *Dickens and His Readers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 86.
6. All quotations from *Great Expectations* are from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), and pages will be cited in the text.
7. All quotations from the Christmas books are from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), and pages will be cited in the text.
8. "Food and Ceremony in *Great Expectations*", *Essays in Criticism*, XIII (Oct. 1963), 359.

9. Cf. G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 216.
10. This is Barbara Hardy's description of the Dickensian ideal, p. 351.
11. "Was Dickens a Christmas Renegade?" *Dickensian*, XIV (Nov. and Dec. 1918), 286.
12. Richard Baker, *The Drood Murder Case* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 73.
13. All quotations from *Edwin Drood* are from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), and pages will be cited in the text.
14. "Afterword", *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (N. Y.: New American Library, 1961), p. 280.