

HOUSEHOLD WORDS:

OPENING THE WINDOWS ON 'THIS SUMMER DAWN OF TIME': 1850 TO 1859

1850 saw the beginning of another kind of published work by Dickens. From then until the end of his life, he also contributed to, published and edited or 'conducted', two weekly journals which appeared continuously from 1850 to 1870, *Household Words* (1850-9) and its very similar successor *All The Year Round* which ran from 1859 and after Dickens's death continued under the editorship of his son, Charles Dickens Jr., until 1895. The pages of Dickens's journals offer an unequalled window into the world of mid-Victorian England, its concerns and its achievements, its national and international affairs, as they unfolded week by week. From March 1850 to July 1870 there were 1,061 weekly issues, with over 23 million words, well over 8,000 articles, poems and serial fiction instalments. There were 475 contributors, with over 90 of them women. Dickens himself contributed 108 articles to *Household Words* and 49 to *All the Year Round*.

Setting up his own weekly journal gave him the measure of editorial control he had long wanted. Now he was no longer dependent on other publishers for handling his works, though they did continue to do so: he was a profitable commodity. He could publish, as well as edit and write, and use the medium for his own purposes. He set up offices at 16, Wellington Street North, near Covent Garden, in London: a Spartan, businesslike set of rooms, but a place in central London where he could stay if he wished and where he could entertain guests as well as work. He gathered together a staff of very talented young men including his sub-editor William Henry Wills and used a number of other established writers too, like Mrs Gaskell and later Wilkie Collins. There were no bylines on the articles to identify the writers (though we do know their identities from the account books kept showing payments to contributors); the whole enterprise was advertised on the first page of every weekly issue as "Conducted by Charles Dickens": usually enough to guarantee sales.

The publication was designed to cover a wide variety of topics: literary, political, social, current events, poetry, reviews, biography, one-off fiction (he did not plan to include serials but later changed his view). It enabled him to put very high-class writing on the market, far higher quality work than in some contemporary journals, which often tended to reprint from longer works: this was original, engaging, varied, and it gave him a platform for his political and social views. *Household Words* dealt with topics of the day like sanitation and housing,

poverty and education, 'process' articles on scientific and technological developments in layman's language, factory conditions and governmental inadequacy. It was a weekly journal of twenty-four pages, published on Wednesdays but bearing the date of the following Saturday. Each issue usually included six to ten items of original writing. It cost twopence an issue. The leading article was always carefully chosen and was often by Dickens himself.

The journal was very influential, and often quoted in newspapers and other works; it did what he wanted it to do: it helped to form opinions. He was aiming at a middle-class audience: hence the stress on *Household* values; he was taking an embattled stance on important issues: hence the quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry V*; the price of two pence per issue aimed it at a particular social bracket where he wanted his influence felt.

It was, as expected, an immediate success. The first issue sold about a hundred thousand copies, settling afterwards to a stable 38,500. The real attraction, though, was the by-line "A Weekly Journal Conducted by Charles Dickens" appearing on the front page and at the top of every other page. It made a healthy profit of £1,715 in the first year, and £2,270 in the third year. This initial success dropped away as time went by, however, and a fall in sales had happened by 1853-4. In the early stages of the journal, half-yearly profits moved between £900 and £1300. There was a drop to £527 in 1853, further down to £393 in March 1854. By September 1854 (and *Hard Times* ran from April to August) profits were back up by an astonishing 237% to £932.

Dickens set out his manifesto in the first issue, 30th March 1850: "A Preliminary Word":

We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers. We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look. We seek to bring into innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time.

In a letter to his friend and later biographer John Forster, on 7th October 1849, he had written that everything was to be "as amusing as possible, but all distinctly and boldly going to what

in one's own view ought to be the spirit of the people and the time." He has a clear social, moral and educational agenda to follow.