

WESTMINSTER ABBEY
Friday 7 June 2024
Oration by Marion Dickens

It is an honour to speak at the anniversary of the death of my great-great grandfather and to lay a wreath on his famous grave. I thank the Dickens Fellowship very much for inviting me, and especially Jacquie Stamp for her help and organisation.

A warm welcome goes to Lily and Anton, pupils at Gad's Hill School, where I have been a school governor for many years. And a special welcome to Molly and Jem Forsyth, my grandchildren, who have also got the afternoon off school, and are visiting their great-great-great-great grandfather's grave for the first time.

On Tuesday, 14th June, 1870, at 9.30 in the morning on a lovely summer's day, Charles Dickens was buried here, in the greatest of all English cathedrals. His gravestone is as plain as it is possible to be. It gives only his name, without his two middle names, John and Huffam, and the dates of his birth and his death. Nothing else: no inscription that hints at the impact that this phenomenally gifted man had had on the society that he had been born into 58 years before.

His funeral was as short and simple as it was absolutely possible to be. His coffin was loaded early that morning from his country home at Gad's Hill on to a private train and brought to Charing Cross. There, a plain hearse waited to carry it the short distance down Whitehall. When it drove into Dean's Yard, the great Abbey bell rang out. No one about in the streets at that time of day had a clue for whom the bell tolled, or that one of the most famous people on the planet was being laid in his final resting place. The coffin was carried through the cloisters into the nave. The doors were closed. A daily service was due to start at 10.00am, so 30 minutes later, the short committal was done.

There were 14 mourners. There was no singing. No eulogy. Just quiet organ music and the prayers of the burial service, and a few personal words from the Dean, Arthur Stanley.

By the end of that day, the open grave, with the coffin lying five feet below the floor, was overflowing with flowers and heartfelt messages from the people who filed past in their thousands - and they continued to crowd into Poets Corner until the grave was closed two days later.

The death of Charles Dickens was mourned all around the world. Queen Victoria sent a message of condolence to his estranged wife, Catherine Dickens. His great friend and biographer, John Forster, later described the simple service thus:

‘Nothing so grand or touching could have accompanied it as the stillness and silence of the vast Cathedral.’

Eight years earlier, Dickens had criticised the state funeral of the Duke of Wellington in his magazine *Household Words*. It had been a magnificently fabulous, extravagant spectacle. The coffin of the great hero of the nation was carried on a solid bronze funeral car, twenty-seven feet long, eleven feet wide, and weighing 12 tons. His victorious battles were emblazoned on it in gold: all personally approved by Prince Albert, who did like plenty of bling!

It was a pity its wheels were not steerable. By the end of its 4-hour journey from Horse Guards to St Paul’s, the 12 horses pulling the gigantic monster were exhausted, and it had to be pushed up Ludgate Hill to the cathedral. Dickens wasn’t criticising the honours due to the great defeater of Napoleon. He condemned the commercial exploitation of the nation’s tribute to him. The ‘dubious purveyors’ of merchandise, the sale of seats and viewing rooms along the funeral route, autographs, food and drink, relics. This was not the genuine way to honour a great life. It was an excuse for shameful profiteering. He called it ‘**Trading in Death**’.

He wrote angrily:

‘It is so plainly a pretence of being what it is not: a substitution of the form for the substance: ...: a palpably got up theatrical trick: it puts the dread solemnity of death to flight, and encourages those shameless traders in their dealings on the very coffin-lid of departed greatness. **In a word, it is Fake.**’

The stillness and silence of his own funeral were carefully planned. He knew his death would trigger an outpouring of national tributes and he wasn't having any fakery attached to himself. He put his affairs in order as his health declined. Practical, determined, passionate, as always, I like to think I can hear his commanding voice, as he dictates his Last Will and Testament.

'I emphatically direct that I be buried in an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner, that no public announcement be made of the time or place of my burial, that at the utmost not more than three plain mourning coaches be employed, and that those who attend my funeral wear no scarf, cloak, black bow, long hatband, or other such revolting absurdity.'

He did not intend to lie in this magnificent setting, among the literary greats with their splendid monuments. However, on his death, the public sentiment to elevate him to a place in Poets Corner was powerful. In the days since his sudden death of a brain haemorrhage at Gad's Hill the previous Thursday evening, there had been frantic correspondence about funeral plans. The local parish church was the family's first choice, and his own. Rochester Cathedral requested he be buried in their chapel, where they had already dug a grave. *The Times* wrote a leading article, published on the Monday, stating:

'the only fit resting place for the remains of a man so dear to England was the abbey in which the most illustrious Englishmen are laid ... the greatest instructor of the nineteenth century should not be absent.'

The Dean of Westminster made it known that he would instantly approve a request for burial in Poets Corner. And, on Monday, it was agreed with the Dickens family that he would be interred here on Tuesday. In a tiny ceremony that respected his wishes — or many of them. The grave was speedily dug overnight, and the little group of mourners gathered here very privately early next morning to say their final farewells.

So here we join him, on another lovely summer's day, in a simple, solemn, short service to remember and celebrate his greatness — the creator of stories and characters that have illuminated the lives and imaginations of readers the world over and changed the world for the better. In his lifetime, his popularity was unparalleled. Everyone loved and read him, from the Queen to the illiterate poor, who paid a halfpenny to have each new monthly episode read aloud to them. He created a new class of readers.

His books and his characters continue to inspire adaptations in every creative medium. The concluding instruction of his Will – the fundamental point of his final wishes, simply reads:

‘I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works’

Charles, my extraordinary ancestor, you were spot-on about that. On the coffin-lid of your departed greatness stands a treasury of writing that is as alive and kicking as ever. You did not want - or need - any extra bells, whistles, 12-ton funeral cars or revolting absurdities for your life’s work to be appreciated. It has stood the test of time.

I am very proud to stand here in 2024 and say that there was nothing Fake about the secret service that took place on this spot 154 years ago, and nothing Fake about my great-great grandfather and his genius.

Marion Dickens

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