

# Charles John Huffam Dickens

7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870

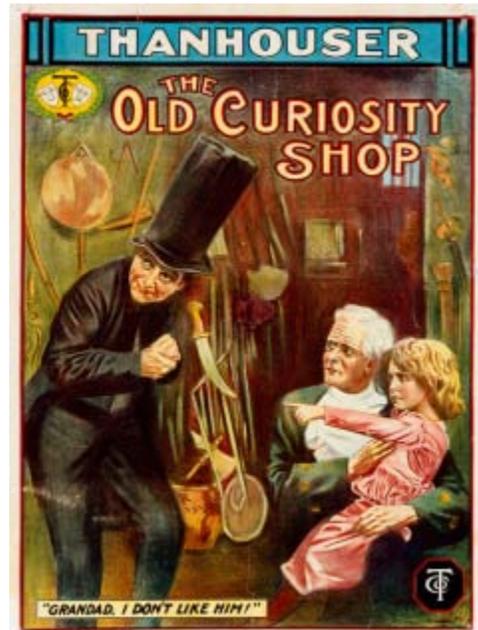
Charles Dickens is generally considered the greatest novelist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During his lifetime, his works enjoyed unprecedented fame, and they remain popular to this day, though it was not until the later twentieth century that his genius was fully recognized by critics and scholars. The novels are alive with some of the most iconic images, moments, and characters of English literature.

Dickens was born the second of six children to an English Naval Pay Office clerk and lived a happy childhood until his father's confinement in the Marshalsea prison for debt, upon which Dickens began another life, almost in a different world, this one impoverished. At the age of 11, he was set to work for six shillings a week labeling bottles in a blacking (shoe polish) warehouse, an experience that directly inspired the early chapters of *David Copperfield* and the suffering sustained by the title character. He worked later as an office boy, and legal student, but mastered the new and difficult art of shorthand to become, at age 20, a reporter in the House of Commons. In 1833, Dickens began contributing sketches and stories to magazines and newspapers (under the name "Boz"), quickly gaining significant recognition. *The Pickwick Papers* began monthly serial publication when he was only 25, catapulting him into fame, especially after the introduction of fast-talking cockney Sam Weller in the fifth number. *Oliver Twist* appeared in 1837-1838, and *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1838-1839: incredibly, Dickens wrote the last numbers of *Pickwick* concurrently with the first numbers of *Twist*, and over-lapped the end of *Twist* with the beginning of *Nickleby*. In 1840 he began the magazine *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in which two further novels were serialized, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, the first of which, with its innocent and doomed child-heroine, became a national and international obsession.

In 1842, Dickens received the kind of mass welcome that perhaps only Chaplin ever later experienced, when he made his famous—and infamous—first visit to the United States. The demands of his celebrity—“levées”, “speechifying,” and constant intrusions of privacy—combined with his dismay at the realities of slavery and still-evolving American social customs and public institutions, as well as (at best) lukewarm reception of his pleas for international copyright (which made British authors the mainstay of American pirates throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to overturn his high expectations: “This is not,” he wrote home, “the republic of my imagination.” His lop-sided



Charles Huffam Dickens (ca. 1867-1868)  
Image from Wikipedia in the Public Domain



The Old Curiosity Shop (January 20, 1911)

## Charles John Huffam Dickens

*American Notes*, 1842, were one result. Further damage to his American reputation was done by the American chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1843-1844, in which the title character is nearly dies of fever in a fraudulent pioneer settlement pointedly christened "Eden."

A *Christmas Carol*, the immortal tale of Scrooge, restored his bank balance and his readers' faith. "It seems to me a national benefit," wrote his arch-rival Thackeray, "and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness." In 1849 he visited Italy and began to contribute to the radical newspaper *Daily News*. His return to England in 1850 was followed by 11 years of great success, during which he published *David Copperfield* (his "favourite child") in 1849-1850, *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1854, *Little Dorrit* in 1855-1857, and *Great Expectations* in 1860- 1861. These years also saw his family expanding and a breath-taking round of activities with a large circle of friends.

Many of Dickens's works were originally published serially in monthly installments, a format of publication that Dickens himself helped popularize. Unlike other authors who completed novels before beginning serialization, Dickens was often only days ahead of the printer with his month's copy, and he sometimes revised his plot or modified a character on the basis of the response of readers to a published episode, or friends to a section circulated in proof or manuscript, most famously modifying the bleak original ending of *Great Expectations* to allow the hero Pip a glimpse of happiness with the icy heroine, Estella. The practice lent his stories a particular rhythm, with cliffhangers often keeping the public on edge until the next installment. The continuing popularity of his novels and short stories is such that they have never gone out of print.

In 1858 Dickens abruptly and cruelly separated from his wife Catherine, who had borne him ten children. Restless, unwell, and aging, he fell passionately in love with a young actress, Ellen Ternan, and launched himself headlong into a demanding but glittering second career as a public reader of his own works—what he called an "other interpretation of myself." Dickens revisited the United States in 1867, this time triumphantly. At his death, exhausted, in 1870, he left an extraordinary a legacy of 14 major novels, countless articles and short pieces, and the half-completed serial *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which has ever since tempted continuation. He was buried in in Westminster Abbey. His critical reputation fluctuated wildly over the next century, but his work never lost its hold on readers—especially young readers, including future film-makers like Griffith, Chaplin, Hitchcock, Eisenstein, and David Lean.

Dickens's work has been highly praised by writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, George Orwell, Vladimir Nabokov, and G. K. Chesterton for its realism, comedy, prose style, unique characterizations, and social criticism, though others, such as Henry James and Virginia Woolf, criticized it as melodramatic, sentimental, and implausible.



Little Dorrit (January 29, 1913)

## Charles John Huffam Dickens

The Thanhouser Company produced and released six films based on Dickens' novels:

1. *The Old Curisoty Shop* (January 20, 1911)
2. *The Early Life of David Copperfield* (October 17, 1911)
3. *Little Em'ly and David Copperfield* (October 24, 1911)
4. *The Loves of David Copperfield* (October 31, 1911)
5. *Nicholas Nickleby* (March 19, 1912)
6. *Little Dorrit* (January 29, 1913)

Surviving Thanhouser Dickens films on this DVD include the three *David Copperfield* episodes held by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Torino, Italy and *Nicholas Nickleby*, held by the British Film Institute in London, England.

Copyright © 2012 Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.

Sources:

Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Dickens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens), accessed 3/13/2013.

Dr. Joss Marsh, Associate Professor, Indiana University (1998-2013) and Curator, Kent Museum of the Moving Image (2012- ).

Bowers, David Q., **Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History**, Filmography entry for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. (Portland, Oregon), 1995.