

CHARLES DICKENS

Recalling The Colossus

Sisir K Majumdar

[The Bi-centenary Birth Anniversary of Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) falls in 2012. Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England, UK. He died suddenly at the age of 58 at Gad's Hill on June 7, 1870 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, London.]

CHARLES DICKENS IS generally regarded as the greatest English novelist of his time. Much in his works appeal to simple and sophisticated, to the poor and the deprived and also to Queen Victoria (1819-1901). Alexandrina Victoria was the queen of Great Britain for 64 years (1837-1901). Dickens was a child of Victorian England, and poverty, deprivation and appalling socio-economic condition of common people in England were reflected in his writings. The range, compassion and intelligence of his apprehension of the contemporary society and its shortcomings enriched his novels and made him both one of the great forces of the 19th-century literature and an influential spokesman of the conscience of his age.

Dickens was being compared to William Shakespeare (1564-1616) for his imaginative range and energy, while he was still in his twenties. Both Dickens and Shakespeare are the two unique popular classics that England has given to the world. They are remembered not for one masterpiece [as in the case of the Italian poet-Alighieri (1265-1321), the Spanish novelist, dramatist, poet Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes (1547-1616) or the English poet John Milton (1608-1674) of "Paradise Lost" (1667) fame] but for a creative world, a plurality of works populated by a great variety of figures, in situation ranging from the sombre to the farcical. For the common reader both Shakespeare and Dickens survive through their characterisation. Dickens, however, writes about the time he was living in—an urban industrial world, in which notions of representative government and social responsibility were current—a world containing many of the problems and hopes that persist two centuries after his death and far beyond the land of his birth.

Tired and ailing though he was remained inventive and adventurous in his final novels. "A Tale of Two Cities" (1859) was an experiment—an exciting and compact narrative. The French Revolution (1789) scenes are vivid :

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way...."

—A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

THE LEGACY

Today, 200 years after his birth, Charles Dickens is acknowledged as the first, and arguably greatest modern urban novelist. His writings form a giant atlas of the life of the metropolis of London—the capital of the then British colonial empire, Dickens and London are indeliably bound together.

Dickens tracks a changing society in an emerging industrial society. Many aspects of his work are profoundly unsettling, especially his insistent descriptions of the terrible living conditions of the poor, whose sufferings were largely or totally ignored in the Victorian Great Britain.

Dickens's ultimate aim was to reform and improve society. He attacked financial fraud, government incompetence, 'red tape' (a term he invented) and inadequate education and total illiteracy. Sadly, inequalities and poverty still exist in London, still belighting lives. Dickens's words still challenge Londoners today....

Annex-I

Dickens : A Profile

- Born, Feb 7, 1812 at Landport near Portsmouth, Hampshire.
- Childhood—spent Chatham, Kent, England (1817-1822) : some allusions of the place in his fiction.
- Married Catherine in 1836—Had 10 children—seperated in 1858.
- Lives in London (1822-1860).
- Permanently moved to Gad's Hill near Chatham, Kent, England, in 1860.
- Middleclass origin.
- One grandfather—a domestic servent and other embezzler.
- His father—a clerk in the Navy Pay Office—well paid but extravagant—some of his failings and his ebullience dramatized in Mr Micawber in the partly autobiographical—“David Copperfield” (1850).
- Charles withdrawn from school in 1824—put to manual work in a factory and his father went to prison for debt.
- Schooling ended at 15.
- Clerk in a solicitor's office—then a shorthand reporter in the law courts.
- A parliamentary and newspaper reporter.
- Literary and Cultural Career—professional actor in 1832 : Early stories and essays—then novels.
- Middle Years—Journalism.

- Last Years—Tired and ailing but adventurous in his final novels.
- Died suddenly at Gad’s Hill on June 9, 1870. Buried in Westminster Abbey [Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882), also buried in Westminster Abbey]. —End of the era of “19th Century Shakespeare of English Literature”.

Annex-II

Major works of Dickens

I. NOVELS

1. The Pickwick Papers (1837)
2. Oliver Twist (1838)
3. Nicholas Nickleby (1839)
4. The Old Curiosity Shop and Barnaby Rudge (1841) : Two novels first published in a “clock framework”—later abandoned under the title of Master Humphrey’s.
5. Martin Chuzzlewit (1844)
6. Dombey and Son (1848)
7. David Copperfield (1850)
8. Bleak House (1853)
9. Hard Times (1854)
10. Little Dorrit (1857)
11. A Tale of Two Cities (1859)
12. Great Expectations (1861)
13. Our Mutual Friend (1865)
14. The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870, unfinished)

II. CHRISTMAS BOOKS

1. A Christmas Carol (1843)
2. The Chimes (1845 for 1844)
3. The Cricket on the Hearth (1846 for 1845)
4. The Battle of Life (1846)
3. The Haunted Man (1848)