

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in a town on the coast of England, where his father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the Royal Navy pay office. Charles's early childhood was a happy one, but when the family moved to London things changed. His father began to find it more and more difficult to manage financially, and the family sank into poverty and debt. Although he was only twelve years old at the time, Charles was sent to work in a blacking (shoe polish) factory near the Thames River. There he worked from eight in the morning until eight at night.

Soon thereafter John Dickens was imprisoned for debt, and the family was broken up. Charles and his sister were boarded out, and Mrs. Dickens and the younger children went to live in her husband's prison, a common practice in early nineteenth-century England. After three months in prison, however, John Dickens came into a small inheritance and was set free.

These experiences were the most painful of Charles's life, so painful that he found it difficult even to speak of them. In a fragment of an autobiography that he never finished, he wrote:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I . . . felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my

breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in . . . was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more, cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children, even that I am a man, and wander desolately back to that time in my life.

Although the autobiography was never finished, Dickens drew on his experiences in his novels. For example, in *David Copperfield* the young hero is sent to work in a blacking warehouse, and the novel *Little Dorrit* is set in a prison. It is easy for readers to conclude that the compassion we are made to feel for some of his characters comes from the depth of Dickens's feelings about his own misfortunes.

After his father was freed from prison, Charles was able to attend school for a while but left to become a law clerk, later teaching himself the skills necessary for court reporting. He read widely in the library of the British Museum, and most importantly, he began to write. His comic sketches of English life were published in magazines, and after the success of his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens entered an incredibly fruitful writing period, producing the novels *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, among many others. He published his novels in serial form, often ending an installment at a crucial point, with his hero or heroine desperately in need of rescue