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The Chimes: Dickens?s New Year Carol

This analysis is of a paragraph from Charles Dickens?s *The Chimes*, first published in 1844.

At the time of writing Dickens?s *A Christmas Carol* is widely studied at GCSE. In 1843 the book, which Dickens carefully embellished to look like a Christmas present, sold out within hours, and has never since been out of print. The reviews were good too, even if the Utilitarian Philosopher John Stuart Mill thought the turkey Scrooge gives to the hungry Cratchits might disturb the Free Market Economy. Whether Dickens was nettled by Mill or not, Mill?s *laissez faire* outlook was his next target when he wrote *The Chimes*, a sequel to *A Christmas Carol*, in 1844.

Disraeli, coming into his own as a politician at this time, coined the phrase ?lies, damned lies, and statistics?. Mr Filer, the political economist in *The Chimes*, drags out ?tables? to mislead on every subject:

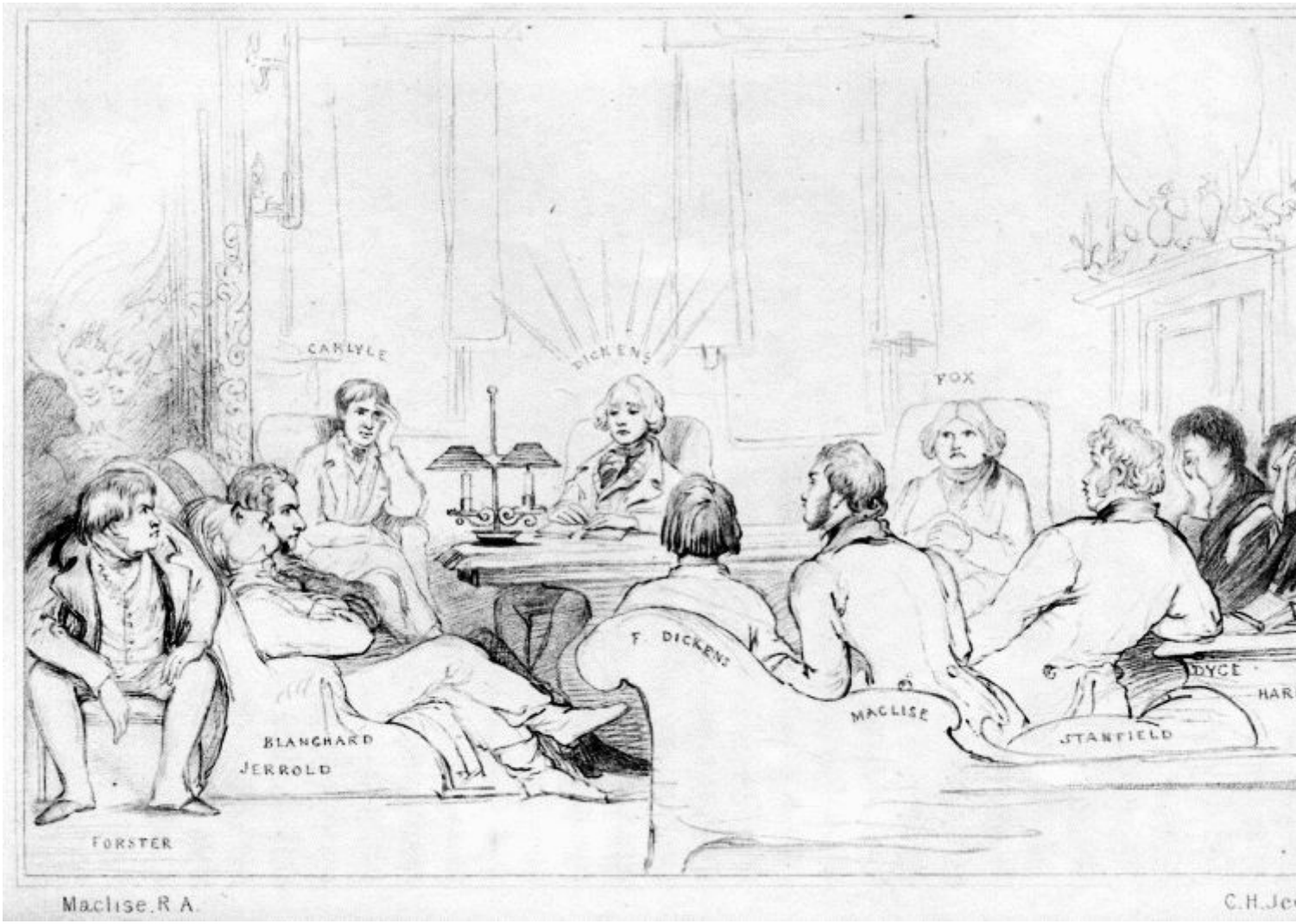
> ?But who eats tripe?? said Mr. Filer, looking round. ?Tripe is without an exception the least economical, and the most wasteful article of consumption that the markets of this country can by possibility produce. The loss upon a pound of tripe has been found to be, in the boiling, seven-eights of a fifth more than the loss upon a pound of any other animal substance whatever. Tripe is more expensive, properly understood, than the hothouse pine-apple. Taking into account the number of animals slaughtered yearly within the bills of mortality alone; and forming a low estimate of the quantity of tripe which the carcases of those animals, reasonably well butchered, would yield; I find that the waste on that amount of tripe, if boiled, would victual a garrison of five hundred men for five months of thirty-one days each, and a February over. The Waste, the Waste!? (*The Chimes ?* Chapter One, The First Quarter?)

He is talking to a hard-working sixty-eight-year-old errand boy on a zero-hours contract who eats tripe because it?s all he can get. Dickens, whose instincts as a writer are always democratic, attacks the assumption, prevalent among free-marketeers, that the poor and destitute are the ?surplus? in a Malthusian society. Poor old Toby presents the economists with a chance to prove their theories. One of them, Alderman Cute (meaning *acute* or sharp), knows the working-classes are all skivers and scroungers. Trotty can?t deceive *him*. Another, Sir Joseph Bowley, thinks of himself as the ?perpetual parent? of poor men like Trotty, and is quite prepared to condescend to them as long as they pay their rent. Even the most benign of the group, the unnamed ?Gothic? enthusiast who thinks the only good times were the middle ages,(?You don?t call these, times, do you??), compares the starving old man unfavourably with the ?bold peasantry, and that sort of thing? of former years. And then there is Filer, showing how useful what Orwell calls the ?unnecessary detail? is to the Dickensian style. That ?hothouse pineapple?, so ridiculous if you try to envisage it, is a wonderful touch. This is Dickens at his hardest hitting, showing what G.K. Chesterton calls

the honourable qualities of ?pugnacious people?.

Dickens? second Christmas book appeared at Christmas 1844. It is subtitled ?A GOBLIN STORY OF SOME BELLS THAT RANG AN OLD YEAR OUT AND A NEW YEAR IN? and focuses on the New Year Holiday much as *A Christmas Carol* focused on Christmas Eve. Where Scrooge is visited by three spirits and individually converted in a single night, the aged Trotty, convinced by the politicians that he was born bad and is now useless, clambers up into a bell tower (to kill himself?), but is astonished find a goblin standing like a shadow beneath the shroud of each bell. The goblins supply a vision which characterises the ?hungry forties?, a Europe-wide depression that coincided with the famine in Ireland that was soon to fill the streets of Liverpool with starving refugees. Meanwhile Friedrich Engels was taking notes on Manchester slums. Prime Minister Peel was desperately defending the protectionist measures known as the Corn Laws, which artificially kept up the price of bread. The Chartists were clamouring for the rudiments of democracy, falling on deaf ears. There was discontent in the Mills and agriculture paid starvation wages. Trotty dreams not of what he might have done and been, like Scrooge, but of how he must suffer as a ?statistic?, for he is ?a long way past the average age, you know? (Mr Filer again). And if the public outlook is bleak, what happens to Trotty?s nearest and dearest in the future the goblins foretell? Kind Meg, his daughter, takes to prostitution, and dies. Richard, her fiancé, is permanently out of work. Their unemployed agricultural friend Will Fern prefers direct action and burns a few ricks, symbol of the stored wealth of the landowners and hopes they will soon burn ?all over England.? The constables are after him. Slum landlords and tommy-shop owners make a killing at the expense of poor people who have nowhere else to turn.

All this is pretty tough fare to digest with the plum pudding.Scrooge thought paying taxes to support a few prisons and workhouses meant he could wash his hands of his ?hungry brethren in the dust.?*The Chimes* shows, in the same key as the Ignorance and Want scenein the earlier book, just why he could not.Dickens uses every artistic resource at his disposal to make political points in *The Chimes*.He tried the results on a hand-picked audience in December 1844 at his friend John Forster?s house in Lincoln?s Inn There he sits, in a contemporary illustration, hair hanging over his shoulders, leading the gig like a sixties rock-star.



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Macready, the leading actor of the day, could not stand the tension and anguish of the reading when Dickens followed up his performance in Paris.The novelist knew he was onto something: ?If you had seen Macready last night,? he wrote ?undisguisedly sobbing and crying on the sofa as I read, you would have felt, as I did, what a thing it is to have power.?

Why not read *The Chimes, A Christmas Carol*?s dark younger brother, possibly the angriest book about Christmas ever written?

Works Cited

For an account of Mill?s review of *A Christmas Carol in the Westminster Review*, see Adam Gopnik, *Winter: Five Windows on the Season* (London: Quercus, 2012).

Charles Dickens, *The Chimes*, (1844). http://www.gutenberg.org/files/653/653-h/653-h.htm [1]

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George Orwell, ?Charles Dickens? (1930) ch. 5. http://www.online-literature.com/orwell/orwell_dickens/5/ [2]

Letter from Charles Dickens to Catherine Dickens, 2 December 1844, in Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson

and Madeline House, *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), IV, 234-45.

Links
[1] http://www.gutenberg.org/files/653/653-h/653-h.htm
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