A PRELIMINARY WORD

THE name that we have chosen for this publication expresses, generally, the desire we have at heart in originating it.

We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers. We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look. We seek to bring into innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time.

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to grim realities, will give a harsh tone to our Household Words. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to its nurture, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide that day!) can never be extinguished. To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out:—to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding—is one main object of our Household Words.

The mightier inventions of this age are not, to our thinking, all material, but have a kind of souls in their stupendous bodies which may find expression in Household Words. The traveller whom we accompany on his railroad or his steamboat journey, may gain, we hope, some compensation for incidents which these later generations have outlived, in new associations with the Power that bears him onward; with the habitations and the ways of life of crowds of his fellow creatures among whom he passes like the wind; even with the towering chimneys he may see, spirit out fire and smoke upon the prospect. The swart giants, Slaves of the Lamp of Knowledge, have their thousand and one tales, no less than the Genii of the East; and these, in all their wild, grotesque, and fanciful aspects, in all their many phases of endurance, in all their many moving lessons of compassion and consideration, we design to tell.

Our Household Words will not be echoes of the present time alone, but of the past too. Neither will they treat of the hopes, the enterprises, triumphs, joys, and sorrows, of this country only, but, in some degree, of those of every nation upon earth. For nothing can be a source of real interest in one of them, without concerning all the rest.

We have considered what an ambition it is to be admitted into many homes with affection and confidence; to be regarded as a friend by children and old people; to be thought of in affliction and in happiness; to people the sick room with airy shapes ‘that give delight and hurt not,’ and to be associated with the harmless laughter and the gentle tears of many hearths. We know the great responsibility of such a privilege; its vast reward; the pictures that it conjures up, in hours of solitary labour, of a multitude moved by one sympathy; the solemn hopes which it awakens in the labourer’s breast, that he may be free from self-reproach in looking back at last upon his work, and that his name may be remembered in his race in time to come, and borne by the dear objects of his love with pride. The hand that writes these faltering lines, happily associated with some Household Words before to-day, has known enough of such experiences to enter in an earnest spirit upon
this new task, and with an awakened sense of all that it involves.

Some tillers of the field into which we now come, have been before us, and some are here whose high usefulness we readily acknowledge, and whose company it is an honour to join. But, there are others here—Bastards of the Mountain, draggled fringe on the Red Cap, Panders to the basest passions of the lowest natures—whose existence is a national reproach. And these, we should consider it our highest service to displace.

Thus, we begin our career! The adventurer in the old fairy story, climbing towards the summit of a steep eminence on which the object of his search was stationed, was surrounded by a roar of voices, crying to him, from the stones in the way, to turn back. All the voices we hear, cry Go on! The stones that call to us have sermons in them, as the trees have tongues, as there are books in the running brooks, as there is good in everything! They, and the Time, cry out to us Go on! With a fresh heart, a light step, and a hopeful courage, we begin the journey. The road is not so rough that it need daunt our feet: the way is not so steep that we need stop for breath, and, looking faintly down, be stricken motionless. Go on, is all we hear, Go on! In a glow already, with the air from yonder height upon us, and the inspiriting voices joining in this acclamation, we echo back the cry, and go on cheerily!
Article: ‘A Preliminary Word’ by Charles Dickens

In this editorial manifesto for his new journal Dickens is concerned to position it among the many already existing weekly publications that were aimed at a mass market. Outstandingly successful among these was Chambers's Journal, founded as Chambers's Edinburgh Journal in 1832, published at three half-pennies, with a circulation of over 50,000. It was intended to provide 'a meal of healthful, useful and agreeable mental instruction' for all classes and conditions of readers, and mingled informative articles with poetry and some fiction (see L. James, _Fiction for the Working Man_, [1974 edn.], pp. 16-17).

John Sutherland calls Chambers's 'the direct inspiration' for _HW_ (The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction [1988], p. 113) and W. H. Wills, Dickens _HW_ sub-editor, had worked on it 1842-5. For Dickens, however, Chambers's was 'a somewhat cast-iron and utilitarian publication (as congenial to me, generally, as the brown paper packages in which Ironmongers keep Nails)' (Pilgrim, Vol. IV, p. 110), and he here announces how different the editorial emphasis in his own journal will be. As Harry Stone has pointed out (Stone, [The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850-1859, 2 vols (London: Allen Lane, 1969)], Vol. I, p. 13), 'A Preliminary Word' expresses 'some of Dickens's most deeply held beliefs' which appear again and again in his writing, not least in the two novels that came next after the founding of _HW_. The idea of the 'Romance' to be found in 'all familiar things' is a major part of the inspiration for _Bleak House_ (1853-4), as the preface to that novel states, and the need to 'cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast' and the dire consequences of society's failing to do so is absolutely central to _Hard Times_ (1854). If Dickens is concerned to distinguish _HW_ from Chambers's, he is even more concerned to distance it from the publications of G. W. M. Reynolds, whose sensational _feuilletons_, _The Mysteries of London_ (1846-8) and _The Mysteries of the Court of London_ (1849-56), were published in weekly penny numbers and had a huge circulation. Reynolds started his penny weekly, _Reynolds Miscellany_, in 1846, writing its first serial _Wagner: The Werewolf_, and featuring in every issue an address 'to the industrial classes' in which (as in his _Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper_ begun in 1850) he expounded his strong Chartist and republican views (he had emerged as an active Chartist leader in 1848). The extremity of his political views was abhorrent to Dickens, as was his sensationalist fiction. Hence the double denunciation of him as a 'bastard of the Mountain' ('the Mountain' was the name given to the Robespierre/Danton party, which sat high up in the 1790s French National Assembly; in 1848 the term was revived to denote the extreme republican party in France) and as a 'pander to the basest passions of the lowest natures'. In _Household Narrative_ for April 1851 Reynolds was described (p. 73) as 'a person notorious for his attempts to degrade the working men of England by circulating among them books of a debasing tendency'. No doubt an extra wedge was given to Dickens's detestation of Reynolds by the fact that the latter had imprudently and profitably plagiarised _Pickwick Papers_ in his _Pickwick Abroad: or the Tour in France_ (1837-8), in which the Pickwickians are plunged into 'the sensualities of the Paris underworld' (James, _op. cit._, p. 61).

Literary allusions

'Slaves of the Lamp': alludes to the story of Aladdin and the wonderful lamp in _The Arabian Nights_; 'shapes "that give delight and hurt not"': from Shakespeare, _The Tempest_, Act 3, Sc. 2; 'the old fairy story': the story in _The Arabian Nights_, called 'The Sister who envied their Younger Sister', in which those climbing a stone-strewn mountain in quest of a magical bird 'hear on all sides a confusion of voices...a thousand injurious abuses' meant to alarm and discourage them; any climber...
who stops to look behind him is at once turned into stone (The Arabian Nights, trans. E. W. Lane [1901], Vol. 6, pa. 277); 'the stone have sermons in them...good in everything': Shakespeare, As Your Like It, Act 2, Sc. 1.

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Author(s):
- Charles Dickens


In the partnership agreement under which H.W. was set up, Dickens was, with the publishers Bradbury & Evans, with Forster and with Wills, one of the joint proprietors; he held an interest of one-half share. On Forster's relinquishing his one-eighth share in 1856, Dickens divided that one-eighth between himself and Wills. Dickens's salary as editor was £500 a year; he was to receive payment also for what he wrote in the periodical (Lehmann, ed., Charles Dickens As Editor, pp. 19, 195-97). (In the Office Book, Wills did not record the payments made or credited to Dickens for his H.W. writings.)

Dickens set the editorial policy of H.W. and supervised its being carried out. He had, in Wills, a capable and efficient subeditor on whose judgment he came more and more to rely; yet, especially in the early years of H.W., he concerned himself with every detail of its production. Before the first number appeared, he wrote to friends and acquaintances asking them to become contributors. He read - especially during the early years of H.W. - hundreds of MSS, some submitted directly to him, others referred to him by Wills for final acceptance or rejection. When possible, he conferred weekly, sometimes more often, with Wills on editorial matters. When personal conference was not possible, he sent his instructions and suggestions by letter - instructions and suggestions ranging from matters of editorial policy to matters of typography and punctuation. He revised - sometimes almost entirely rewrote - contributed papers; he read proofs - sometimes revises of proofs that he had in the first place altered or emended. He suggested subjects for articles; he sent to the office materials to serve as the basis for articles. On occasion, he made excursions in company with a staff member to gather material.
for articles. He wrote much for the early volumes of H.W., comparatively little for the later volumes. Morley's writings in the periodical exceeded his by some 300 pages. Nevertheless, as he stated when he brought H.W. to a close ("A Last Household Word"), his name had been, "as his pen and himself" had been, "inseparable from the Publication" throughout its entire existence.

Most of Dickens's writings in H.W., like almost all contributions of other writers, appeared anonymously. Only Hard Times, the one of his novels that he serialized in the periodical, carried with the title of the work in each instalment the ascription "BY CHARLES DICKENS." Four weeks before the serialization of that book began, it was announced: "NEW TALE by Mr. CHARLES DICKENS"; thereafter, each week's H.W. number announced the portion of Hard Times by Charles Dickens that was to appear the following week; before the appearance of the final chapters, as also after the completion of the serialization, H.W. published advertisements for the novel in book form as a Bradbury & Evans publication. A Child's History of England, Dickens's only other extended work in H.W., appeared in the various instalments without Dickens's name after the title, but, during the serialization, advertisements in H.W. for the History in book form as a Bradbury & Evans publication stated Dickens's authorship.

Of various other of his H.W. writings Dickens also made his authorship known. "Personal," his statement concerning the "domestic trouble," bore his name as signature. "Curious Misprint in the Edinburgh Review," his reply to J. F. Stephen's article "The License of Modern Novelist," announced: "the hand of Mr. Dickens writes this paper." In "A Nightly Scene in London," it was "I, the Conductor of this journal," who told of coming upon the poor souls crouched before a Whitechapel workhouse. The footnote that Dickens added to "Three Graces of Christian Science" he signed "C.D." Writing in first or third person, Dickens also made clear that he was author of the introductory and closing comments in H.W. ("A Preliminary Word," "All the Year Round," "A Last Household Word"), as of "Pet Prisoners," the detective police articles, "The Guild of Literature and Art," "The Late Mr. Justice Talford," and "To Working Men."

In bold type, the words "CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS" appeared on the H.W. masthead; in small type they spanned the verso and recto of facing pages. In the first five years of H.W.'s publication, Dickens's name appeared in more than seventy-five H.W. advertisements and announcements in connection with the periodical and one of its supplementary publications, and in connection with A Child's History and Hard Times (in some advertisements and announcements his name appeared as many as three times). In the last year of H.W.'s publication, readings by Mr. Charles Dickens were announced in forty-one H.W. numbers. Dickens was omnipresent in his periodical.

In view of this fact, as also for other obvious considerations, Dickens naturally wanted in H.W. stories and articles no laudatory references to himself - or references that might be so construed. Thus, in "Our Society at Cranford," he substituted mentions of Hood and Hood's writings for Mrs. Gaskell's mentions of Boz and Boz's Pickwick and Christmas Carol: "... with my name on every page of Household Words," he wrote to Mrs. Gaskell (Dec. 5 [4], 1851.), "there would be - or at least I should feel - an impropriety in so mentioning myself." In a letter to Cunningham, June 24, 1853, he referred to his "usual precaution" in deleting from articles references that "unmistakably" applied to himself. An exception to this policy was the publication in H.W. of a personal letter from John Pascoe Fawkner, in which Fawkner...
stated that Dickens's writings had "beguiled many an hour of my life," and wished Dickens "many years of healthful employment in the highly useful manner" in which he had been so long engaged ("A Colonial Patriot").

But the observation of a reader (a reader of "a quick wit and a happy comprehension," as Dickens characterized him) that Dickens's writings had the tendency "to hold up to derision those of the higher classes" also found a place in H.W. pages ("Ready Wit").

Impersonal references to himself and to his books Dickens had no objection to. Mention of "Mr. Dickens" appeared of necessity in Morley’s "Our Wicked Mis-statements"; in occasional articles by non-staff writers mention of Dickens was appropriate and unobtrusive. References to his novels - *Pickwick, Oliver Twist, Nickleby, Chuzzlewit, Dombey, Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit* - their characters, place-names, distinctive phraseology - appeared in one or more items by Stone, Dodd, Capper, Oxenford, Miss Lawrence, Payn, Morley, Costello, the Rev. James White, Samuel Sidney, Kent, Percy Fitzgerald, Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Linton, and Thornbury. (The reference to Mrs. Gamp in "Railway Waifs and Strays" could be by either of the joint authors - Wills or Hill.) Of these references, the most extended was Fitzgerald's recital, in "My Long Lost CheekyId!", of the plot of a melodrama based on Dombey; the most amusing was White's depiction, in "Fiction Crushing," of a Dora-like wife who comes to despise her Copperfield prototype. In at least seven of his own articles, and in one by him and Wills, Dickens referred to characters in his novels. In a footnote to "Pet Prisoners" he mentioned American Notes, and in "That Other Public" he quoted from the book.

Various of Dickens's H.W. writings elicited praise from contemporaries. Among his articles in the early volumes, for example, "A Child's Dream of a Star" seemed to Percy Fitzgerald written with Dickens's "most delicate touch"; and nothing, thought Fitzgerald, could be "more witty or sarcastic" than "Red Tape" (*Memories of Charles Dickens*, pp. 137, 155*). Crabb Robinson found one of the "Raven" articles "a witty paper," "a capital satire" (*On Books and Their Writers*, II, 704). The Quart. Rev. (June 1856) mentioned Dickens's "excellent papers" on the London detective police. Mrs. Cowden Clarke wrote to a friend: "The 'Christmas Tree' paper is charming, is it not?" (*Letters to an Enthusiast*, p. 32). Among Dickens's articles that antagonized certain readers were "Frauds on the Fairies," "Pet Prisoners," and "Whole Hogs." Dickens's remonstrance, in "Frauds on the Fairies," against George Cruikshank's rewriting "Hop-o'-My-Thumb" to serve propaganda purposes provoked a reply from Cruikshank, in which he justified his treatment of fairy tales and set Dickens right "upon one or two points" (*George Cruikshank's Magazine*, Feb. 1854). Dickens's comments on prison chaplains, in "Pet Prisoners," resulted in his being "severely mauled at the hands of certain Reverend Ordinaries" ("Small-Beer Chronicles," A.Y.R., Dec. 6, 1862). "Whole Hogs" aroused the indignation of temperance advocates (Kitton, "Introduction" to *Old Lamps for New Ones and Other Sketches and Essays*, by Dickens; also, Dickens's H.W. article "Sucking Pigs"). Dickens's statement, in H.W., concerning his domestic affairs was generally condemned as in poor taste.

Dickens's relationship with most of his contributors was amicable. To some who were newcomers in the field of writing he at times wrote detailed criticisms of their submitted MSS, with words of advice and encouragement. Among H.W. writers who, at one time or another, showed their regard for him by dedicating to him a book were Marston, the Rev. James White, Wickenden, Förster, Prince, Landor, Charles Knight, Samuel Sidney, Wilkie Collins, Marguerite
Power, Duthie, Spicer, Wills, Yates, Lever, Kent, Percy Fitzgerald, Payn, and Thombery. Hans Christian Andersen, who was technically not a contributor, but one of whose stories appeared in *H.W.*, dedicated three books to Dickens.

Of the items included by Dickens in *Reprinted Pieces*, "A Plated Article," recorded in the Office Book as by Dickens and Wills, was reprinted by Wills in his *Old Leaves: Gathered from Household Words*, 1860, there indicated as written in part by Dickens. Wills's Office Book ascription of the item to Dickens and to himself is more authoritative as to its authorship than is Dickens's reprinting.

As Dickens's letters and as occasional comments by contributors indicate, Dickens made changes - deletions, additions, emendations - in more items than those for which the initials "C.D." appear in the Office Book jointly with the name of a contributor. Thus, it is not inconceivable that he might have written the hymn, sometimes attributed to him, that concludes "Poor Dick's Story" in the 1856 Christmas number (see identification note on Harriet Parr). The attribution, however, seems to be in error.

*Harper's* reprinted, in whole or part, seventeen of Dickens's *H.W.* articles and stories (including "A Plated Article," claimed by both Dickens and Wills), three acknowledged to *H.W.*, nine to Dickens personally, and five unacknowledged to any source. *Harper's* reprinted as by Dickens eight items not by him (see Elizabeth Gaskell, Home, Sala, Morley, the Rev. James White, Harriet Martineau, Wilkie Collins, Eliza Lynn Linton). Two of Dickens's items were included in the Putnam volumes of selections from *H.W.: Home and Social Philosophy*, 1st and 2nd ser. The collection of Dickens's *H.W.* items published in 1859 by the Philadelphia publishing firm T. B. Peterson, *Dickens' Short Stories. Containing Thirty-one Stories Never Before Published in This Country*, contained no items that Dickens had not included in *Reprinted Pieces*. D.N.B.

Author: Anne Lohrli; © University of Toronto Press, 1971.

Dickens served a full newspaper apprenticeship, beginning as a teenage penny-a-liner for The *British Press* (1826). Having taught himself shorthand in the late 1820s, Dickens practised the craft in the antiquated courts of Doctors' Commons before moving up to join the select band of parliamentary reporters, working first for his uncle's voluminous *Mirror of Parliament*, then for the radical *True Sun* during the stormy passage of the Reform Bill through parliament (1832), and finally securing a coveted reporter's job on the newly-reorganised *Morning Chronicle*, under veteran Benthamite editor John Black (1783-1855). There he undertook varied work - theatre reviewing, election reporting, express reporting of extra-mural political events, as well as enduring the daily grind of parliamentary debates. Given the fluctuating demands for space which the latter placed on a 7-column broadsheet like the *Chronicle*, room was soon found for Dickens's witty sketches employing, amongst a wardrobe of other styles, the rhetoric of political journalism to narrate the world of everyday Londoners. These came to be signed 'Boz', and between 1836 and 1839, together with tales from the *Monthly Magazine* and *Bell's Life in London* they were republished to extensive acclaim, overlapping with the monthly release of 'Boz's next great success, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37).

Thereafter, Dickens's writing ventures all self-consciously straddled the permeable frontier between journalism and popular literature. He left the daily press for the more genteel world of monthly magazines, with the editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany* (1837-39), but sought to reconnect with satirical weekly journalism through editing *Master Humphrey's Clock* for Chapman
& Hall (1840-41). This was something of a misfire, in journalistic terms, though it bequeathed *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* to literature. So too was Dickens's involvement with the *Daily News* (1845-46); critics point to the fact only 17 issues of the new Liberal broadsheet were published under his watch. Yet Dickens's effectiveness, as celebrity launch editor, should not be underestimated; his newsgathering and recruiting arrangements stood the test of time, and he led from the front with a series of inventive contributions on social and cultural issues.

Even while seeking to reposition himself as a serious novelist with *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), Dickens returned to newsprint, with around 30 anonymous reviews and irony-laden leaders for the *Examiner* under John Forster (1848-49). These were a prelude to his return to full-time editing and leader-writing, with *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* - hugely successful enterprises in weekly magazine journalism which, however, did not prevent Dickens from writing a further eight serial novels and undertaking punishing tours as a public reader in Britain, France, and America. Dickens is now widely recognised - and was during his lifetime - as a crucial contributor both to the popular appeal and the respectability of the mass-market newspaper and periodical press.


Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

**Genre(s):**

- **Prose: Editorial**
  
  Announcement or commentary written by or on behalf of the editor, editorial team, or the magazine itself (see also Prose: Leading Article).

- **Prose: Leading Article**
  
  The article published first in any given magazine issue, below the masthead.

**Subject(s):**

- Ethics; Morals; Moral Development; Moral Education; Philosophy; Values
- Family Life; Families; Domestic Relations; Sibling Relations; Kinship; Home;
- Literature; Writing; Authorship; Reading; Books; Poetry; Storytelling; Letter Writing
- Newspapers; Periodicals; Journalism
- Utilitarianism
- Work; Work and Family; Occupations; Professions; Wages

**Citation (MHRA):** Dickens, Charles, 'A Preliminary Word', *Household Words*, I, 30 March 1850, 1-2
N.B. The layout of prose articles exported to PDF follows the two-column format of the original, but does NOT preserve the original line breaks. The layout of poems exported to PDF follows the original line breaks, but does NOT attempt to replicate the original indentation or stanza structure. For all these features please refer to the facsimile pages on DJO.