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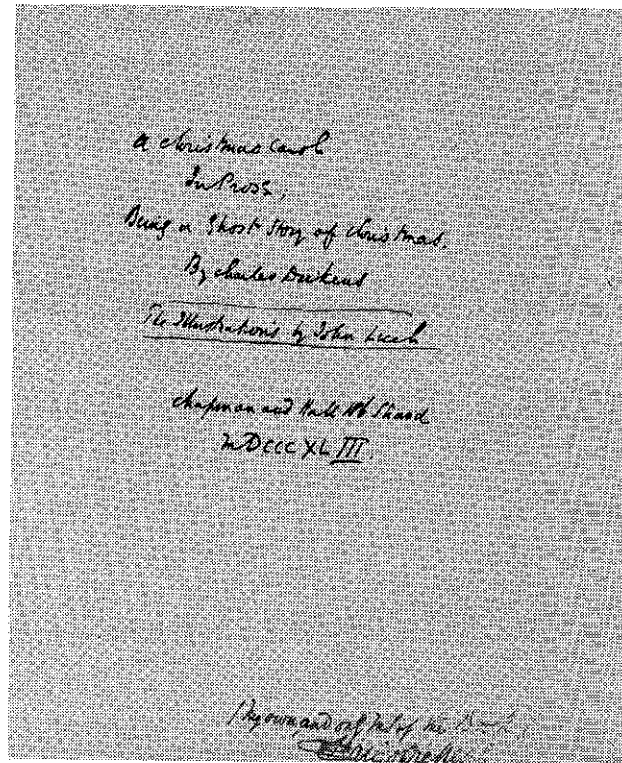
## Charles Dickens and *A Christmas Carol*

When Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, he was 31 years old. Six years earlier, with the publication of his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, he had become one of the world's most popular writers. Between 1836 and 1843, he had written five novels, including *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Both those books dealt with the way young people — especially the children of the poor — were treated and educated in England at the time. Dickens, who probably wrote about children more frequently than any other great novelist, was a passionate crusader for the cause of better education for children of all classes.

In 1843, Dickens was working on his sixth novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. At the same time, he was gathering information for an article about the schools in jails (children were sometimes jailed in Victorian England, and men who were put into prison for debt were often accompanied by their families) and about the "Ragged Schools" — volunteer establishments set up to teach the children of the poor. In October of that year he was invited to the English industrial center of Manchester to address a meeting on education for the working classes.

While there, he began to plot a new story, and upon his return to London, he plunged into the writing of a tale about a chilly old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge and the three Spirits who teach him, one Christmas Eve, about the



Title page of Dickens' manuscript of *A Christmas Carol*. (1848)

responsibility of the wealthy toward those less fortunate, especially children.

He finished *A Christmas Carol* in only six weeks, while writing *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In late November, confident of an enthusiastic reception, he sent the *Carol* manuscript off to his publishers.

His publishers, however, outraged him by insisting that the tale had no commercial potential. As a result, Dickens assumed the responsibility for publishing the volume himself.

Upon the book's publication in December, 1843, it was immediately clear that Dickens' publishers had been wrong. Some 6000 copies — the whole first edition and part of a second — were sold in the few weeks before the New Year, and Dickens received hundreds of letters from delighted readers all over Britain. Vindicated, he eagerly awaited the royalties.

The immediate profits, however, were meager. Because he wished the book to

be both beautiful and available to working people, Dickens had included eight hand-colored illustrations by John Leech while insisting that the book be sold for a mere five shillings. Consequently, the profit from the sale of the first 6000 copies was a disappointing 230 pounds sterling. When he received the first disastrous financial statement from his publishers, Dickens wrote, he "slept as badly as Macbeth."

Ultimately, of course, Dickens was rewarded financially for *A Christmas Carol*, as edition followed edition throughout 1844 and the years that followed. Pleased by the deeply personal response the book evoked in its readers, Dickens continued to revise and improve it with each printing.

Readers loved it not so much for the social message about which Dickens cared so deeply, but for the story's

emotional impact. Dickens had created Scrooge partly as a "straw man" — a character whose basic attitudes were set up in order to be knocked down. Scrooge's indifference toward the Cratchits (and especially toward the child, Tiny Tim) would be corrected by the "education" to which the three Spirits of Christmas subject him, by his introduction to the ghostly children whose names are Want and Ignorance, and by the terrifying glimpse of his own lonely deathbed. But Dickens could not create simple propaganda: Scrooge assumed a life of his own, becoming villain and hero alike, one of the best-known characters Dickens ever created.

Many critics have questioned the literary value of *A Christmas Carol*, especially in comparison to Dickens' great novels. Nevertheless, it is the world's most popular Christmas story, and Dickens himself loved it. He added it to his repertory of public readings, which were always in demand. In early 1870, as his health was failing, he chose a reading of *A Christmas Carol* as his final public appearance. Toward the end of his life, he often prefaced his autograph with Tiny Tim's words, "God bless us, every one!"

One of the simplest and most telling defenses of *A Christmas Carol* came from Dickens' great friend and literary rival, William Makepeace Thackeray, who wrote: "Who can listen to objections regarding a book such as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness."