

CHARLES DICKENS: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY. By Jack Lindsay. (Dakers; 18s.)

This book is not merely another addition to the already extensive pile of literature debunking the Victorians; though it does indeed present the great novelist as a man far from perfect. That his imperfections—notably his attitude towards his wife and children—were due in large measures to the demands and vagaries of his creative genius is a point which the author is at pains to make. Indeed, it must be uncomfortable for all concerned to have a genius in the family. There were undoubtedly times when Dickens's behaviour bordered on the hysterical and the insane.

Mr Lindsay's book gives a vivid picture of the life of England in the nineteenth century, with its violent contrasts and the social injustices which resulted from the rapid rise of industrialism. Because Dickens was moved to attack social evils and the official indifference or incompetence which produced them, the author credits him with a Marxian outlook which he probably did not consciously possess. Dickens felt very strongly about certain evils and certain forms of hypocrisy, but his opposition to them was a matter of feeling rather than of principle. The attraction for him of jails and madhouses, of the depraved and abnormal, is constantly reflected in his works. He heartily condemned slavery in America, and at home he agitated for the abolition of public executions. (The Catholic Church, incidentally, he regarded as 'a means of social degradation'.)

More interesting perhaps is Mr Lindsay's interpretation of certain episodes and certain oft-recurring themes in the novels as being connected with the novelist's early psychological struggles. Dickens's relations with his mother, with his sister Fanny and later with his wife's sisters (who were so much more important in his life than the unfortunate Kate), are all reflected in the novels, which Mr Lindsay, acting on this Freudian hypothesis, submits to a searching analysis. There is, we find, a prurience about many passages in Dickens which many of his readers have, perhaps fortunately, overlooked. I do not suggest that Mr Lindsay is wrong: quite the contrary. Dickens was certainly not the typical Victorian of twentieth-century imagination. The author of this book shows him almost as a survival of the eighteenth century, heir to the traditions (including, at least in his conversation, the coarseness) of Smollett and Fielding.

The book contains a number of misprints which, one hopes, will be rectified in a subsequent edition.

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