

DISCOVERING THE PAST

WHEN CHARLES DICKENS READ A CHRISTMAS CAROL IN LIMERICK

Each year Christmas creeps up earlier and becomes more elaborate, with decorations both inside and outside houses, and multiple gifts to everyone and their dog.

It has not always been this way, even fifty years ago Christmas was a much more subdued affair, with only a single gift and a family dinner being the norm.

The festivities of Christmas were associated with the Roman Catholic faith, and as such were celebrated primarily by the rural poor, as practicing the Roman Catholic faith was forbidden for almost 150 years in Ireland. Oliver Cromwell preached against "the heathen traditions" of Christmas carols, decorated trees, and any joyful expression that desecrated "that sacred event."

In Dickens' childhood in England celebrating Christmas had become virtually obsolete in the towns and cities. This didn't change until the Bank Holidays Act of 1871 established Christmas as an officially recognised holiday in both England and Ireland.

Charles Dickens grew up in poverty. When he was 12 years old he had to go to work in a factory. Here he worked 14 hours a day, six days a week. His childhood experiences undoubtedly influenced his novels, which often worked around a central poor character.

In 1842, aged 30, Dickens put pen to paper and began to write what would become A Christmas Carol. On its first release the following year the story made





Dickens little money, but it made him famous and spawned a series of copycat books and plays. Although he could not have known it at the time, in this novel Dickens invented Christmas as we know it today. This was the same period in which Queen Victoria and her German husband popularised a decorated tree as a Christmas tradition.

On August 21, 1858 Dickens arrived in Dublin by ferry as part of a book tour of the British Isles. While in Ireland he visited Cork and then Limerick. At the time Dickens was considered a celebrity, and news of his arrival and dates of shows were widely publicised. When he arrived in Limerick he took a room in the

Cruise's Royal Hotel, where Cruise Street is today. On his first night he wrote to his nephew "This is the oddest place of which nobody in any other part of Ireland seems to know anything. Nobody could answer a single question we asked about it."

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On Wednesday evening September 1, 1858, Dickens took to the stage at the Theatre Royal. The Theatre Royal on Henry Street was built in 1841 by Joseph Fogarty. It was a single story building where the Smyth's Toy Store is today. It was the theatre of choice in the nineteenth century, though with the advent of cinema plays became an infrequent activity. In January 1922 the theatre was destroyed by fire. Dickens said of the theatre, "There is one large room, and I read in the Theatre – a charming Theatre. The best I ever saw, to see and hear in."

His first evening at the Theatre did not go as professionally as Dickens was accustomed to, stating the following day "Arthur says that when he opened the doors last night, there was a rush of three Ducks! We expect a Pig to-night." Despite this he thought the tour successful stating, "I am very glad we came,

though we could have made heaps of money by going to Dublin instead."

On the first night in Limerick Dickens read his Christmas Carol, "give from his own lips the details of Ebenezer Scrooge's sinister peculiarities," the following night he also read "Boots at the Holly Tree Inn." On both nights the local press stated that he was dressed in the fashion of the day, "a rose in the coat, and the snow whiteness of the shirt was further relieved by sundry gold studs."

It is believed by some historians that Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is responsible for our continued observance of Christmas and the customs of gift giving, thanks and time spent with family. The story revived very old customs that had been on the verge of dying out and the Christmas season would be a very different without "A Christmas Carol". Charles Dickens died in 1870 at the age of 58 and is buried in Poet's Corner at London's Westminster Abbey.

Article by: Sharon Slater

Picture of Charles Dickens: Left is an illustration by John Leech from the original A Christmas Carol, 1843, Previous page: Charles Dickens by unknown artist, 1842.