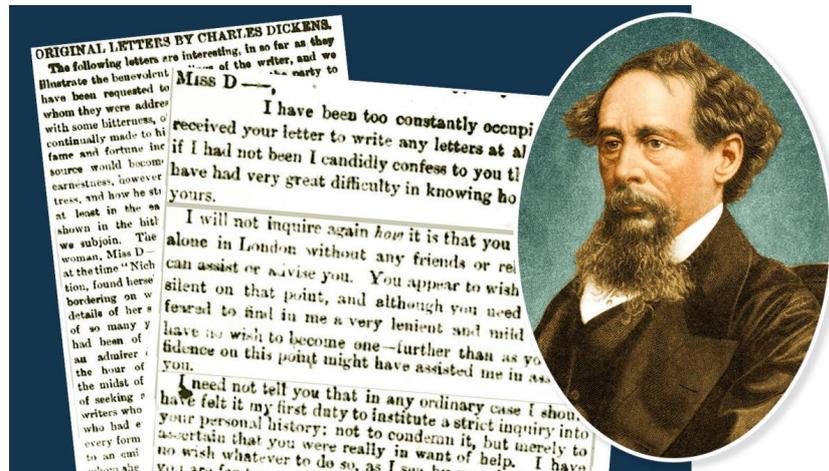


Letters show how Charles Dickens helped an impoverished stranger

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Wednesday September 29 2021, 4.00pm,
The Times



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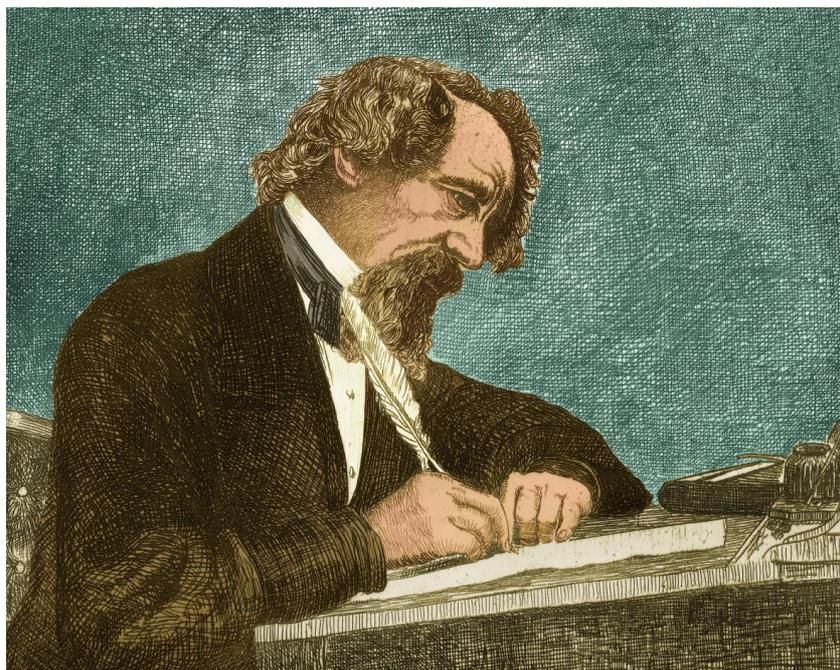
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The beginnings of [Charles Dickens](#)'s mission to help the impoverished people he wrote about in his novels have been discovered in three letters to a mysterious Glaswegian woman.

Although Dickens devoted much of his life to [helping the poor](#), he usually did so by using his celebrity, making speeches or disbursing funds provided by a philanthropist.

However, the letters show that he wrote to a woman, known only as “Miss JD”, on at least three occasions after his rise to fame, each time enclosing a postal order for a small sum of money that he referred to as “a trifle”.



Dickens wrote to the woman three times, sending her small sums of money, after she pleaded for help

ALAMY

The Charles Dickens Letters Project, based at Queen’s University Belfast, found the text of the letters, which were previously unknown to scholars, in a copy of Glasgow’s *Evening Citizen* newspaper from June 15, 1870.

Dr Leon Litvack, editor of the project, said the letters were interesting not only because they showed Dickens giving his own money to a woman in distress, but also because Miss JD had hoped to benefit twice by trying to sell the letters after the author’s death.

“It was unusual for Dickens to take someone under his wing in this way — particularly so early in his career,” Litvack said. “The letters show that he provided her with sums of money to help her along.”

Dickens first wrote to Miss JD on June 17, 1839, when he addressed her formally in a letter in which he referred to himself in the third person.



ORIGINAL LETTERS BY CHARLES DICKENS.

The following letters are interesting, in so far as they illustrate the benevolent feelings of the writer, and we have been requested to publish them by the party to whom they were addressed. Mr. Dickens has written, with some bitterness, of the appeals for help that were continually made to him; and it is probable that as his fame and fortune increased, the annoyance from this source would become more intolerable. With what

earnestness, however, he listened to any real tale of distress, and how he strove to relieve and assist the helpless, at least in the early part of his career, is finely shown in the hitherto unpublished documents which we subjoin. They were sent to a respectable young woman, Miss D— belonging to this city, who in 1839, at the time "Nicholas Nickleby" was in course of publication, found herself in the great Metropolis in a condition bordering on want. It is needless to dwell on the details of her story, as related to us, after the lapse of so many years, by herself. Suffice it that she had been of literary tastes, a diligent reader, and an admirer doubtless of genius; and accordingly in the hour of her distress, finding herself alone in the midst of strangers, she naturally bethought herself of seeking advice and assistance from some of those writers who had laid their hearts open to the world, and who had evinced the keenness of their sympathy with every form of human suffering. Her first application was to an eminent poet, a countryman of her own, with whom she obtained the favour of an interview. That gentleman took a loaf of bread from his table, and holding it up exclaimed—"If I were to assist all who come

The letters were published in Glasgow's Evening Citizen in 1870, when the woman tried to sell them

NOT KNOWN

He wrote that "he encloses a trifle towards the alleviation of the writer's distress and the attainment of her honest object; regretting that, with many other claims upon him, he cannot afford more, and sincerely trusting that better prospects may open upon her before long".

The woman's circumstances remained bleak and she travelled from her native Glasgow to London in hope of better prospects.

Dickens's second letter, on July 25, 1839, was warmer. He

referred to himself in the first person and offered her a series of payments. The author, who had become a household name since the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, apologised that he could not help her to get a job.

His last known letter to Miss JD was on December 14, 1839, when he wrote her a brief note enclosing “some slight temporary relief” and promising to write again.

An article in the Glasgow newspaper said that the woman had become more financially secure and had married, but that she fell on hard times again when she and her husband became ill. This prompted her to sell the letters through the newspaper, which invited readers to inspect them at its offices before making a bid.

Litvack said that the letters showed “the beginnings of [Dickens’s] practical efforts on behalf of the poor”.

Miss D —,

I have been too constantly occupied since I received your letter to write any letters at all, and even if I had not been I candidly confess to you that I should have had very great difficulty in knowing how to answer yours.

I will not inquire again *how* it is that you come to be alone in London without any friends or relations who can assist or advise you. You appear to wish to remain silent on that point, and although you need not have feared to find in me a very lenient and mild judge, I have no wish to become one—further than as your confidence on this point might have assisted me in assisting you.

I need not tell you that in any ordinary case I should have felt it my first duty to institute a strict inquiry into your personal history; not to condemn it, but merely to ascertain that you were really in want of help. I have no wish whatever to do so, as I see by your letters that you are far too sensitive already to struggle against the adversity with which you have to contend, and I should be sorry for a moment to increase the delicacy or sorrow of your position. I regret to say that I have not, nor am I likely to have, any means of helping you to a situation; but I must remind you that if I had, and even felt that confidence in you which I am disposed from your letters to entertain, I could not possibly hope to convey it to anybody else unless I could at the same time

tell them far more about you than at this time I know myself. The letters of recommendation which you have sent me (and which I now return) are ridiculous—conceived and expressed in a manner which could not fail to do you injury with any one to whom you show^{them} them. You have done quite right, I think, to keep them to yourself.

In this position, with so many other claims of a similar kind constantly made upon me, and not seeing how I can assist you *permanently* (which is, what I would wish to

The author told the woman that he could not recommend her for a job in London because he did not know her
NOT KNOWN

Dickens only began making regular speeches on behalf of the poor after his visit to America in 1842. He did not meet Angela Burdett Coutts, the philanthropist whose funds he used to help impoverished women find a new life abroad, until July 1839, a month after the first letter.

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