

Bleak Health: The Medical History of Charles Dickens and his Family *by Nicholas Cambridge*

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This delightful book written by a retired GP and Dickens scholar is based upon a comprehensive analysis of Dickens papers. It is divided into four chapters, with a reading list plus detailed notes.

Chapter 1 is a description of medicine as practised in the middle of the 19th century, with interesting sections on Victorian pharmacy and the use of popular drugs, along with insights into Mesmerism and Phrenology, then in vogue. Chapter 2 describes Dickens's obsessive practices and rituals. His frequent headaches and bouts of depression, his asthma and the various treatments applied. There is a very interesting section on Dickens developing carbon monoxide poisoning whilst travelling in America and sitting in confined carriages with coal fires burning and all the windows closed. Chapter 3 discusses Dickens's parents, with a description of Dickens wife, Catherine, who bore ten children. However, Dickens left her after she had produced the children and tried unsuccessfully to have Catherine committed to a lunatic asylum. Chapter 4 is about Dickens various siblings. One sister, Fanny, had consumption and Dickens arranged to consult Sir James Clark the eminent chest physician and authority on consumption. There are other interesting examples of the siblings lives, who on the whole did not achieve great success, although one, Henry Fielding Dickens, became a successful London lawyer.

Perhaps further discussion about Dickens being an obsessive, or maybe just naturally curious, would have been of value.

Who is this book for? Probably not the general reader but more for those who want a well referenced book on the medical conditions affecting Dickens and his family. It is rather assumed that the reader knows about Dickens. There is no doubt that Dickens scholars will find the medical detail highly informative. Nicholas Cambridge should be congratulated on authoring this book which is an essential part of Dickens history and is an important addition for students and scholars of Charles Dickens.

Sean P Hughes
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