

# A TALE OF TWO CHARLESES



**Craig Barker** explores the little-known connections between the Nicholson Museum founder and the most famous Charles of the 19th century: Charles Dickens.

Far left: Charles Dickens (1812–70)

Left: Sir Charles Nicholson (1808–1903)

## It is fascinating how much of a role Nicholson may have played in shaping Dickens' view of colonial Australia.

Recent research has revealed a fascinating, if little-known link between the University of Sydney's inaugural provost and founder of the Nicholson Museum, Sir Charles Nicholson, and the most popular novelist of the Victorian era, Charles Dickens.

We know the two met and corresponded, and that Nicholson provided references for two of Dickens' sons who emigrated to Australia in the 1860s. We do not know if they first met when Nicholson was in London in the 1850s after acquiring antiquities for the museum, but it is likely Dickens was aware of Nicholson through his support of Caroline Chisholm's Family Colonization Loan Society, which Dickens advocated and advertised in his magazine *Household Words* in 1851–2.

Nicholson had been one of Caroline Chisholm's most vocal associates and supporters in the colony. He was said to have witnessed first-hand one of her most celebrated exploits, carrying frightened immigrants across the swollen Wollondilly River.

Certainly, after Nicholson's move to the United Kingdom in 1862, the two men met and corresponded. Dickens would have undoubtedly read Nicholson's account *The Australian Colonies: Their Condition, Resources and Prospects*

(1863) as he had been offered a chance to visit Australia to give a series of readings from his own works in June 1862.

Dickens spent several months considering the offer, and even contemplated the title 'The Uncommercial Traveller Upside Down' for a prospective travel book about the voyage.

Although Charles Dickens eventually decided not to visit Australia, his sons Alfred and Edward successfully made the trip. Alfred D'Orsay Tennyson Dickens (1845–1912) was Dickens' sixth child, and at the age of 19 (in 1865), deeply in debt, he sailed for Melbourne. Charles Dickens wrote to his friend Sir Austen Henry Layard, the notable Middle Eastern archaeologist and politician, "I have already good introductions from Sir Charles Nicholson, but should set great store by any that you could give me."

Soon after his arrival in Melbourne, Alfred used Nicholson's introduction to present himself to George William Rusden (1819–1903).

Nicholson had originally met Rusden in 1834, during his first trip to Sydney aboard the *James Harris*. Rusden's father, the Rev. George Keylock Rusden, was migrating to Australia to take up the parish of Maitland, with his wife and 10 of his children. George William Rusden was only 15 years old at the time of the voyage, but obviously made quite an impact upon the young doctor.

By the time he was 22, George Rusden was managing one of Nicholson's properties at Mingay, near Gundagai. As Nicholson's property holdings grew, so did Rusden's operations. By the time he was 30 he had managed properties from the Murrumbidgee to Lachlan and Goulburn districts.

Probably through Nicholson, he was appointed the agent for national schools in 1849, his tours seeing him ride more than 10,000 miles. Later he joined the Council of the University of Melbourne and established a Shakespeare scholarship. He was also remembered as the "finest billiard player in the colony". He is however best known today for his much criticised *History of Australia and New Zealand* (1883). Nicholson and Rusden corresponded throughout their lives and died only months apart.

Several letters reveal the extent to which Charles Dickens appreciated the support Rusden gave his sons. In a letter to Melbourne barrister Archibald Michie in 1865, Dickens writes "Allow me to thank you for your generous interest in my boy. Sir Charles Nicholson has told me of his also having heard from you and of your great consideration in keeping Alfred out of the fangs of the Wolf, Idleness."

Through Rusden, Alfred found work on a property at Corona, before buying property near Forbes with his share of his father's estate.

Dickens' youngest son Edward Lytton Bulwer (Plorn) Dickens (1852–1902) followed Alfred to Australia in 1869, and also entered Australian society through an introduction by GW Rusden. The younger Dickens would end up managing Momba station at Wilcannia and later entering the NSW Legislative Assembly.

There are likely many other connections between Dickens and Nicholson which await discovery in archived letters. It is fascinating how much of a role Nicholson played in shaping Dickens' view of colonial Australia. This in turn, through Dickens' popular novels, would have impacted upon the way Victorian England viewed the development of the Antipodes.

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***Are there more Dickens connections in Australia? Turn to page 20 to read about the Sydney woman reputed to be the inspiration behind his famous character, Miss Havisham.***