



Of his own readings Dickens said that "an effect is produced which seems to belong to nothing else," and in the 17 years that he kept them up his success was sensational. Towards the end of his life he was known to confess that his most cherished day-dream had always been to run a great theatre and a noble company of actors, where everything—even to the editing and altering of all the plays produced—was under his sole command. The readings may have been an expression of this desire.

Dickens's last reading was given in March, 1870, the year of his death. He died very suddenly, at the comparatively early age of fifty-eight. Such a death, wrote G. K. Chesterton, could not but raise doubts about "the wisdom of his impetuous industry. Differences exist about how far he exaggerated the function or how far his biographer exaggerated the danger; but his own letters, ragged with insomnia and impatience, full of desperate fatigue, and more desperate courage, are alone enough to show that he was playing a very dangerous game for a man approaching sixty. "But it is certainly true," Chesterton adds, "... that this was nothing new in the general conduct of Dickens; that he had long ago begun burning the candle at both ends; and there have been few men, in the matter of natural endowments, with so great and glorious a candle to burn."

In the programme *Emlyn Williams as Charles Dickens*, listeners will hear readings from five of Dickens's works:

Our Mutual Friend, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Christmas Stories*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Dombey and Son*.

The work of adapting is as important to him as the actual preparation of the performance, says Emlyn Williams. When Dickens "read," he was safe in assuming that anything unclear in any particular passage would not need explaining as the audience knew the rest of the book by heart. To make the same assumption today would be unfair to an audience, so Mr Williams has "always adapted on the strict assumption that my audience knows nothing at all of the book in question, or has forgotten all it once knew."

If through this adaptation he could make a performance acceptable to an audience who did not know Dickens, "... then there was a chance of coaxing sceptics to lift down from their shelves a book which they had possibly thought of as a ponderous classic, and to turn its pages for the first time with the feeling that they were about to explore a wonderful new world."

Emlyn Williams Reads Dickens

[I]N December, 1853, Charles Dickens, then at the height of his international fame as a novelist, embarked on an extraordinary second career when he gave, in Birmingham, a public reading of one of his own stories.

Almost a century later, Emlyn Williams—actor, playwright, and producer—appeared in front of a London audience as "Charles Dickens, giving a solo performance of scenes from the novels," and re-introduced a type of stage entertainment quite new to present-day theatre audiences. Later he used much the same method to introduce the prose-writings of his fellow-countryman Dylan Thomas, one of these entertainments forming the basis of the popular BBC programme *Dylan Thomas Growing Up*, heard recently in this country.

New Zealand listeners are now to have an opportunity to hear Emlyn Williams as Dickens, in a series of programmes starting from YAs, 3YZ and 4YZ at 3.0 p.m. on Sunday, August 11.

"I am often asked how the idea came to me," wrote Emlyn Williams. "The first tiny seed sprouted in May, 1942, when I was asked to choose four minutes from my favourite book, for a BBC programme called *And So To Bed*. Without hesitation I picked the murder scene from *Bleak House*, and on the evening, as I spoke into that iron-faced microphone, the words—even in that grey little studio, as impersonal as a padded cell—seemed to take on a throbbing life of their own. . . . 'Those words deserve an audience,' I thought with a sigh of regret."

LEFT: Dickens in the role of reader. AT TOP OF PAGE: Emlyn Williams in the role of Dickens

