

HALF-HOURS WITH THE W.E.A.

CANTERBURY

Dickens — Great Social Reformer

"Dickens is a Freak, but One of the Immortal Freaks" — Demand for Novels Has Gone on Increasing — Christchurch Classes Studied the Old Testament Recently.

ONE of the most important subjects in the curriculum of the W.E.A. (in fact, in all adult education movements) is literature. It seems that the more educated people become, the greater is the appreciation of all kinds of literature. Saintsbury says: "There is no doubt also that the popularity of the novel has been very directly connected with a cause which has had all manner of effects fathered upon it — often with no just causation or filiation whatever — to wit, the spread of education. The older departments of literature do not lend themselves with any facility to constant reading by the average man or woman, whose requirements may be said to be amusement rather than positive delight occupation rather than intellectual exertion, and, above all, something to pass time. Accordingly the demand for novels has gone on increasing, and the supply has never failed to keep up with it."

THE W.E.A. literature classes, however, offer facilities to those who are anxious to read and to appreciate the beauty of the older kinds of literature. Some classes specialise in poetry, others in drama, while others take a special period of English history. Last year there were 109 classes with 2503 students in the W.E.A. studying literature and art. These figures will be increased for this year.

THE radio lectures organised by this association include a fair proportion dealing with the various kinds of literature. This is done so that a greater appreciation of the subject may be stimulated. It seems that the rural population provides the greater number of students for such a subject in the W.E.A. This may be due to the fact that the urban population is more interested in social, political and economic problems, because the density of the population makes such problems appear more urgent.

"THE Industrial Novel of the Last Century" is to be the title of a series of talks to be given from 3YA this month by Mr. Winstone Rhodes, M.A. The first talk, given this week, deals with Charles Dickens, who must not be regarded only as a great novelist but as one of the world's greatest social reformers.

DICKENS felt the injustices of the social order of his day and laid bare the rottenness of the social institutions of that period. His writings did much to produce the necessary social changes and a more humane administration of such institutions.

HE was born at Portsmouth in 1812, but in 1814 went to London with his parents, his father later being

transferred to the Chatham dockyard. In 1821, the family fell into trouble by his father losing his post. The elder Dickens was arrested for debt, and consigned to the Marshalsea, and Charles, only ten years of age, and small for his age, was placed in a blacking factory at Hungerford Market, where he labelled blacking bottles. On his father's release, the boy was sent again to school. On leaving school he worked at a desk of a solicitor; but meantime his father had obtained a post as reporter for the "Morning Herald." This fact introduced

to journalism started him on his great career as a writer. From his sad experiences of life he was able to draw the material which awakened England to a consciousness of the sordid state of some of her social institutions.

ONE author states: "The life of Dickens was more than a literary success. He conquered the whole English-speaking world. This world, which numbers now over a hundred millions, loves him and shall continue to love him. This love cheered him in his life, and will keep his memory green."

Dickens and Depression are Subjects for W.E.A. Talks



The W.E.A. lectures for this month from 3YA are as follow:—

"The Industrial Novel of the Last Century," by Mr. Winstone Rhodes, M.A., Lecturer in Literature, Canterbury College. (1) October 20. "Hard Times," Charles Dickens. The change from rural rides to hard times; (2) October 27, "Yeast," Charles Kingsley. The character of his writings and what he shows of England's state of mind.

"Previous Depressions in N.Z. History," by Mr. C. R. Straubel, M.A., (1) October 23: The soup kitchen periods—petitions for aid and emigration—meetings of the unemployed in Christchurch from 1879 onwards—relief rates of pay—doss-houses and rations; (2) October 30: Decline in business—conditions of labour through the 'eighties—boys and women replacing men in work—social legislation of the 'nineties—wages and cost of living through the period; (3) November 6: The plight of the farmer—land speculation—borrowing and rates of interest—the bankruptcy rate—fluctuations in farm produce prices from the 'seventies onwards—improvement to the war period.

Charles to journalism; he taught himself shorthand and visited the British Museum daily to supplement some of the shortcomings of his reading. At the age of 22 he secured permanent employment on the staff of a London paper as reporter. This introduction

PEOPLE lose count of the number of times they read a novel by Dickens. Of how many writers can this be said? If he is disliked, it is because people go to his books with preconceived ideas of what a novel should be. If you go in that spirit you will come away disappointed. Dickens is a freak, but one of the immortal freaks. It is no use saying he depends on exaggeration. It is no use saying that his characters are not real or natural. They are something better than that. They are alive. Nor is it any use pointing out that Dickens has no psychological subtlety, that his characters do not develop, that he does not dissect the minds. To speak of Mr. Pickwick developing does not make sense; his greatest characteristic is that he is Mr. Pickwick, and will ever remain so. The gods do not develop; that is the fate of miserable mortals. There is something a great deal better than change. What if Uriah Heep is always rubbing his hands, or Mr. Carker showing his false teeth? Dickens's curiosities and oddities are more natural than ordinary men; and we must remember that Dickens discovered that the ordinary man is a curiosity. It is a great day in a man's life when he discovers this.

DICKENS doesn't dissect the machine and bring you all the parts, as the modern psychological novelist loves to do; he shows you the machine in action, and a mighty interesting and fantastic machine it is. He has told us so many minute details about his oddities that he has made the impossible possible; or, rather, he has proved himself one of the greatest of realists, a man who really saw the strange things that passed him every day, things to which ordinary people are blind. We pay Dickens the greatest compliment we can pay an author, we treat his characters as friends, and would stake our lives on the actual existence of Mrs. Gamp. You cannot measure Dickens with a tape measure; he is smaller as well as larger than life. You may find fault with him from every conceivable angle, and yet he will remain a thing for people to enjoy because of his astounding vitality. His chimneys, his very dust-bins, and the stones of his buildings and alleys vibrate with life.