



VNiVERSiDAD
D SALAMANCA

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Dickens's Portrayal of Characters in
A Christmas Carol (1843)
and *Great Expectations* (1861)

The Influence of England's Nineteenth-Century
Socioeconomic Context

Autor: Paula María Pastor Barba

Tutor: Román Álvarez Rodríguez

Salamanca, 2017



VNIVERSIDAD
D SALAMANCA

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Dickens's Portrayal of Characters in
A Christmas Carol (1843)
and *Great Expectations* (1861)

The Influence of England's Nineteenth-Century
Socioeconomic Context

This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

July 2017

Tutor: Román Álvarez Rodríguez

Vº Bº

Signature

ABSTRACT [EN]

Being aware of the social injustices that the Victorian Age brought to England, Charles Dickens decided to be charitable with those in need and create didactic and moral novels. Although he belonged to a middle-class family, Dickens was interested on knowing the marginalised and the forgotten. In this way, he carefully studied the distinct social classes of his time, understanding and signalizing their most remarkable features in his literary production. Thus, in this essay, I will explore Dickens's bright critique of the nineteenth-century society throughout examining the portrayal of his fictional characters, which could be based on his own experiences and acquaintances.

KEY WORDS: *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Victorian Age, social critique.

RESUMEN [ES]

Siendo consciente de las injusticias que la era Victoriana trajo a Inglaterra, Charles Dickens decidió ayudar a crear un mundo más justo siendo caritativo con los más necesitados y creando novelas didácticas y morales. A pesar de que pertenecía a una familia de clase media, estaba interesado en conocer a los marginados y olvidados. Por este motivo, estudió cuidadosamente las distintas clases sociales de su época, entendiendo y señalando sus características más remarcables en su producción literaria. Por tanto, en este ensayo, exploraré la brillante crítica de Dickens a la sociedad del siglo XIX a través del análisis del retrato de sus personajes ficticios, que podrían estar basados en sus conocidos y experiencias propias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Era Victoriana, crítica social.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To begin with, I would like to thank my family for being my support throughout these four years of study. They have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams and they have helped me achieve all my goals. For these reasons, I especially dedicate this essay to my parents, María del Pilar Barba Rubio and Miguel Ángel Pastor González, who firstly approached me to literature, and who never impeded my personal development, and to my sister, Carmen Pastor Barba, who let me know that she has felt proud of me.

To Álvaro Paredero Blanco, who accompanied me during this journey, and whose advices made me improve not only on an academic level, but also as a person.

Finally, I would like to thank my tutor, Román Álvarez Rodríguez, not only for his suggestions towards the improvement of this paper, but also for confirming my love for English literature with his classes in my first year at university.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. England in Nineteenth Century: Historical Context	3
1.1. The Victorian Socioeconomic Context	4
2. Charles Dickens's Biography	6
3. Character's Analysis	8
3.1. Upper Classes Characters	8
3.1.1. <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	8
3.1.2. <i>Great Expectations</i>	10
3.2. Lower Classes Characters	11
3.2.1. <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	11
3.2.2. <i>Great Expectations</i>	12
Conclusions	14
Works Cited.....	15
Bibliography	16
Appendix	17

Introduction

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* was successfully published in 1843 selling more than 6000 copies in its first week. However, despite the narrative success, he gained not more than small profits from them. Although it has been read as a Christmas tale for years, its purpose was beyond entertainment. Dickens wrote the novel as a response to the injustices that the Victorian era was permitting: poverty, starvation, illiteracy, miserliness, etc. *A Christmas Carol* narrates a Christmas Eve on the life of Ebenezer Scrooge – a wealthy but stingy man of business. During this significant night, Ebenezer receives the visit of the spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future who make him feel nostalgia, pity and fear through a series of memories and predictions. When Ebenezer Scrooge wakes up next morning he realizes that everything happened in the same night and that he is still alive, so he can prevent the omen. In consequence, he learns to be benevolent and sympathetic, and becomes a kind friend for everyone.

In the case of *Great Expectations*, it was published in 1861 as a weekly serial for *All The Year Round*, a literary magazine founded in 1851 by Dickens himself. Even though, *Great Expectations* is dated on the 1810s, the author criticizes issues that bear the late Victorian Age, whose society he perfectly portrays. The protagonist, Pip – an orphan boy raised by his disciplinarian sister, is given a sum of money and sent to the capital to become a gentleman. Pip falls into vices throughout adolescence, eventually learning kindness and courtesy from his mistakes and realizing that the true value of men does not reside in their money, but in their heart.

This essay will prove that the socioeconomic and historical context of nineteenth-century England shaped Charles Dickens's literary production by means of the very influence that the life experiences and acquaintances of the author had upon the creation of his fictional

characters. For this purpose, I will present the direct consequences of the British Empire expansion and its questionable economic and social prosperity. I will sharpen the repercussion of these factors on Charles Dickens life, focusing on his most remarkable and traumatic experiences, and on those individuals who immediately affected his personal development. Lastly, I will analyse the main characters from *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations* attending to their peculiarities and behaviour, which exemplify the relation between the nineteenth-century background and the author.

1. England in Nineteenth Century: Historical Context

The British Empire reached its culminating point in the Victorian Age, characterized by the Industrial Revolution and the great importance of colonialism, which placed England as the world power of the siècle. Queen Victoria transformed an agrarian country into a global power by industrializing its production and creating an enviable railway network.

The expansion of the Empire¹ through colonization created several conflicts that were extinguished thanks to Britain's naval supremacy. However, the Empire was involved in, at least, five important wars during Victoria's reign, for instance, the Crimean War (1854-1856). The sovereignty of the country was reinforced by the grand international commerce and trade that was established. The Great Exhibition of 1851 - one of the most remarkable events of this period, celebrated the richness and diversity of the British Empire strengthening his hegemony over the rest of the world. Finally, towns and cities expanded, as did also the life expectancy at birth, turning evident the overcrowding. Likewise, as a result of the industrialization of the country, pollution increased and, as a consequence, hundreds of children died before the age of five. Therefore, although the growth of towns and cities was a symbol of Britain's progress, it was also a synonym of decadence and death.

In conclusion, it could be said that the Victorian Age brought fame and prestige to England thanks to the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the Empire. Nevertheless, this glory sometimes shapes the fact that the improvements were aimed to those who owned money, while poor people conditions were aggravated.

¹ Illustration of the extension of the British Empire during Queen Victoria's reign.

1.1. The Victorian Socioeconomic Context

There is much controversy about the relative positivity that the Victorian Age brought to England and, more specifically, to its population. Health problems, criminality, illiteracy and social disparities were on the agenda in the country.

Although industrialization implied new employment opportunities, it could be suggested that working conditions were deplorable. The number of requests made the labour force cheap, which led to starvation. Children were employed on factories where they sometimes died crushed by machinery, since they were placed on those dangerous spaces where nobody else fitted. The regrettable conditions in factories resulted in the contraction of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, which contributed to the rising of death rate.

In addition to these health problems, *The Victorian Novelist: Social problems and social change* signalizes “the notorious conditions of London graveyards” (Flint, 157). Kate Flint quotes from *The First of a Series of Lectures on the Actual Condition of the Metropolitan Graveyards* that graveyards were “centres of infection, laboratories of malaria, whence issue most offensive and deadly compounds, the gaseous products of human putrefaction, the food, if not the principles, of malignant disease and premature death.” (Walker, 1). Moreover, living conditions were far from hygienic, such is the case of the decrepit and crowded houses of the London district of Jacob’s Island that was surrounded “by a stagnant ditch, into which Thames water was sparingly introduced a couple of times a week.” (Flint, 161)

Regarding education and social care, low class children often abandoned school and joined gangs with whom they committed crimes or took the path of prostitution, whereas only upper classes completed their studies. In fact, closer examination conducts to prostitution as a polemical theme in the Victorian novel due to the role of women during that century. Nonetheless, there were active projects for their rehabilitation such as Angela Burdett

Coutts's plan 'Home for Homeless Women' in 1846, whose purpose was to train these women in order to create good housewives "for future colonial workers" (Flint, 233).

As may be seen, the disparities across social classes were rather obvious. While lower classes deal with poverty, starvation, or illiteracy, the aristocracy centred her attention on luxuries and social meetings, where demonstrate her acquisitive power and the triviality of wasting money, forgetting about the problems of lower classes.²

² The Tree of Taxation shows the disparities among social classes.

2. Charles Dickens's Biography

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, on February 7, 1812. Despite belonging to a middle-class family, in *Charles Dickens a Pictorial biography*, J.B. Priestly affirms that John Dickens, Charles's father, "was never able to live long within his income" (5), fact that led Charles to work in a Blacking Factory – one of the most "traumatic experiences" of his life according to *Charles Dickens, an Authentic Account of his Life and Times* (Fido, 14). Nonetheless, John always encouraged his son's education and did not want him to work in the factory. In contrast, Charles's mother insisted on the necessity of his working, since she preferred his little profits before his education. The boy felt humiliated working in the Blacking Factory, because that work was meant for lower classes and not for someone with his family's status. In addition, his financial contribution did not save his family's debts, and his father was arrested and sent to the Marshalsea prison for three years. The Dickens joined John there, but Charles was left outside and had to support himself while his brothers and sisters continued their education.

Living in London, he worked as a lawyer's clerk. Then, he found employment as a shorthand reporter in Doctors Commons, but being dissatisfied with his career, he tried to apply for a job in a theatre. Dickens always hated London, but he was interested in people living in marginal situations. Therefore, he visited several times those neighbourhoods where criminals and murderers committed their infringements with the purpose of exploring this social class. Moreover, he made multiple donations throughout his life to orphanages, prisons, and hospitals to improve the conditions of their occupants.

Another traumatic event of his life was his violent falling in love with Maria Beadnell, a pretty girl, daughter of a London banker, who humiliated Charles with her disregarding towards him. Her sudden and constant mood changes caused young Dickens real suffering.

Later, at the age of 23, Charles met Catherine Hogarth, a woman with a humorous vision of life with whom he shared opinions. Even though the letters Dickens wrote to her lacked passion from the beginning, they finally got married and had ten children. Unfortunately, they were never happy and, after twenty-two years of marriage, he fell in love with another woman and they divorced.

By the time he was twenty-nine, his books were well-known not only in England, but also in Russia and the United States, where they had reached plenty more fame. In 1843, the author wrote *A Christmas Carol*, the beginning of a collection of Christmas books (*The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth, The Battle of Life*, etc.), whose importance lies on the resulting child working conditions change, produced after the publication of this tale, for example, working hours were reduced.

In 1865, he was involved in a railway accident from which his health began to deteriorate. Five years later, on June 9, 1870, Charles Dickens died after having collapsed from a stroke at Gad's Hill Place. He was buried at Westminster Abbey on June 14, where he remains today.

3. Character's Analysis

Charles Dickens knew at his core the different aspects of the two opposite sides of society. On the one hand, he belonged to a family whose antecedents were aristocratic, he had a comfortable childhood and succeeded as a writer soon enough to have a pleasant life. On the other hand, his family's debts led him to work in the Blacking factory and support himself. Besides, as a lawyer's clerk, he got to know the law quite well and to witness the social injustices of his century.

In contrast to J.B. Priestly, who defends in *Charles Dickens a Pictorial biography* that Dickens's stories are not based on his own experiences, I argue that all his characters are, to some extent, mirrors of his acquaintances. Due to his deep knowledge about society, he brilliantly portrays the characters of his novels personalizing each one with the vices and peculiarities inherent of his class. In consequence, I will analyze the main characters from *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations* depending on their social class, this is, dividing the report into upper classes and lower classes, and comparing them with Dicken's relatives and friends.

3.1.Upper Classes

Concerning characters from upper classes, Charles Dickens focuses on their eccentricities, sins, and later redemption mainly. It could be said that Dickens criticizes their vices and tries to give them a fair end according to their regret or vanity.

3.1.1. *A Christmas Carol*

First of all, in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens centres his attention on Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge, "an excellent man of business" (7). From the very beginning of the story, he is defined as "a

squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.” (8) These sentences already present us a clue about the picture Dickens had upon the upper classes of society.

As the tale continues, Scrooge demonstrates his avarice, since he lives saving as much money as he can, unconcerned about repercussions: “Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk’s fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn’t replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room.” (9) Yet, there is one aspect even more remarkable about his personality: his rudeness towards people, especially to those not possessing an important sum of money. For instance, his only nephew, who visited him on Christmas Eve wishing him a good day, receives the following answer:

“Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer. . . every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.” (10)

Nonetheless, Dickens held a merited reward to Ebenezer owing to his redemption and consequent change: “He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. . . His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.” (88) Thereby, it could be said that the author compensates those characters who regret their acts with joy and harmony.

In this case, Dickens’s own interest in the marginalized (impoverished people, criminals, orphans, etc.) is reflected in the figure of Mr. Scrooge, although in a contrary position: while Charles made donations to some institutions commissioned on the improvement of their

conditions, Ebenezer just worried about the existence of places where to maintain them far from the city.

3.1.2. *Great Expectations*

Referring to this novel, Miss Havisham, Stella, Drummle, and Pip – during a short period of his life – stand for the main representatives of upper classes. Here, may be distinguished two different treatments of characters: those who redeem themselves tend to be forgiven, and those who do not tend to be punished.

Firstly, Pip receives the opportunity of becoming a gentleman. He is sent to the capital with enough money to live as a nobleman, where he falls into vices, spending more than he may afford and turning disagreeable to those who helped him when he was still a nobody. Fortunately, he becomes aware about his behaviour and mitigates all harm caused: “O Miss Havisham, . . . There have been sort mistakes; and my life has been a blind and thankless one; and I want forgiveness and direction far too much, to be bitter with you.” (348) Thence, Pip eventually goes back home with Joe and Biddy who are going to marry, and they celebrate their encounter and recovery.

Secondly, Estella, who has been raised by Miss Havisham, becomes a cruel woman with cold heart. She mistreats Pip and laughs at his love to her. She marries Drummle out of economic interest because he is the richest man in London, but also brute and egocentric. These two characters do not find comprehension on the side of the author:

“I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband, who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness. And I had heard of the death of her husband, from an accident consequent on his ill-treatment of a horse.” (421-422)

Estella seems to be a reflection of what Maria Beadnell was to Dickens: a beautiful girl without sentiments who did not care about boys poorer than her. Moreover, Maria and Estella were sent to Paris to complete their education, and both treated Charles and Pip as 'mere boys'.

Thirdly, Miss Havisham is developed in a particular way. She was forced to become a solitary woman thirsty for revenge, however, in the end, she realized that she had deeply damaged Pip who was just an innocent boy. She apologized for her behaviour and was remembered with nostalgia due to her final good contribution to Herbert's business. Nevertheless, she died after being burnt by a fireplace, which suggests that not all her sins were pardoned.

To conclude, Charles Dickens criticizes upper classes focussing on their vices and remarking their errors. However, he gives these characters a chance by offering them a possible happy ending when they redeem from their immoralities.

3.2.Lower Classes

Regarding characters from lower classes, Charles Dickens primarily concentrates on their altruism, and helpfulness towards others. He ultimately repays them with joy and happiness as a reward for their benevolence and satisfactory behaviour.

3.2.1. *A Christmas Carol*

To begin with, Bob Cratchit, the clerk, works for Scrooge for a misery with which he has to support his numerous family. He is permitted a day of vacation on the 25th of December, but receives no more compensation for his services. Still, on Christmas day, he rises his cup to Mr. Scrooge "the Founder of the Feast!" (54) Thus, at the end of the story, Scrooge knocks at his door saying: "Now, I'll tell you what, my friend. . . I am not going to stand this sort of

thing any longer. And therefore, . . . I am about to raise your salary! . . . I will raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family” (87) Scrooge’s act of generosity could be interpreted as the author’s payment for Cratchit’s humanity and endless kindness.

In the same way, Tiny Tim, the youngest son of Bob Cratchit, is rewarded for being as kind, and as good hearted, as any other boy, despite his illness. He receives Scrooge’s attention as a second father and lives long thanks to him.

3.2.2. *Great Expectations*

Returning to *Great Expectations*, one of the most important characters is Magwitch who, touched by young Pip’s help when he escaped from prison, devotes his life to earn money so that Pip may become a gentleman and have an uncomplicated existence. This reminds us of John Dickens, a man who, at the eyes of his son, was unjustly imprisoned. John Dickens was concerned about Charles’s education and did not want to see his son working in the Blacking factory, just like Magwitch did not want to see Pip working at the forge. Magwitch also reminds us of John’s father, who fled overseas for suspected felons and bankrupts, as did Magwitch before being intercepted by the police.

Another important lower class character is Joe, the husband of Pip’s sister. Joe protects Pip from Mrs. Joe and worries about Pip’s sentiments. Even though Pip feels embarrassed because of Joe’s manners and avoids his visits during his early stay in London, Joe comes back to care for him when Pip is ill. At the end of the novel, Pip apologizes for his behaviour towards him, and Joe forgives him and communicates him that he will have a son: “We giv’ him the name of Pip for your sake, dear old chap” (421). In this sense, Joe is rewarded for being generous and forgiving with a happy life with Biddy and his son, and is thanked for all his good actions.

Mrs. Joe is treated differently too. Although she is poor, she is neither altruist, nor helpful

to others. She is proud and “had stablished a great reputation with herself and the neighbors because she had brought me [Pip] up ‘by hand’.” (9) Owing to her bad temperament, she gains some enemies and, one night, she receives a hit on the head which causes her brain damage. As may be seen, she is punished by Dickens for her behaviour, and she finally dies without any of those things she is obsessed with: power and wealth. It could be said that the figure of Mrs. Joe reflects Charles’s mother, who preferred his little incomes before his security and education, a possible symbol of her avarice.

To sum up, lower classes characters are generally portrayed as altruist and gentle. These characters are compensated for their decency and virtues with happy endings and lives, which reveals Dickens’s desire for change and the moral of the stories.

Conclusion

Dickens devoted most of his life to working on his novels. He studied the intricate corners of London to learn first-hand the problems of lower classes, such as the reasons why criminals lurked. He also denounced the unlikely performance of the justice system. Furthermore, he became aware of upper classes vices and eccentricities, their wastage, and the importance they attributed to save face. He employed this information to criticize society and to show ways of progress. He determined that his literature should be didactic and chose personalities of his everyday life to picture characters which could serve as examples.

In summary, Dickens, having cognizance of the social injustices that were taking place on England during the nineteenth century, converted his novels in didactic books which might teach people that society could develop into a better one. For this purpose, he studied the different social classes and criticized his own experiences and acquaintances by portraying characters with the most distinctive features of each class. He rewarded worthy characters with pleasant endings and penalized bad characters with punishments so that the corrupted society could see the consequences of its acts and discipline itself.

Works Cited

- Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol, A Ghost Story of Christmas*. United Kingdom: 1st Edition Media, 2009. Print.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Spain: Plutón Ediciones, 2016. Print.
- Fido, Martin. *Charles Dickens: An Authentic Account of His Life & Times*. London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, 1969. Print.
- Flint, Kate, ed. *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change*. Croom Helm, 1987. Print.
- Priestly, J.B. *Charles Dickens a pictorial biography*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1961. Print.
- Walker, George Alfred. *The First of a Series of Lectures on the Actual Condition of the Metropolitan Graveyards*. London: Longman, 1846. Print.

Bibliography

- Bowen, John. "Great Expectations and class". *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*. British Library, May 2014. Web. 26 Jun. 2017.
- Douglas-Fairhurst, Robert. "Dickens And Christmas". *Oxford University Press*, Dec. 2006. Web. 3 May 2017.
- Eschner, Kat. "Why Charles Dickens Wrote *A Christmas Carol*". *SmartNews*. Smithsonian, Dec. 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.
- Evans, Eric. "Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837 – 1901". *BBC*, Mar. 2011. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.
- Klimaszewski, Melisa. "The many voices of Dickens". *Oxford University Press*, Feb. 2017. Web. 3 May 2017.
- Mullan, John. "Crime in *Great Expectations*". *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*. British Library, May 2017. Web. 24 Jun. 2017.
- Sutherland, John. "The Origins of *A Christmas Carol*". *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*. British Library, May 2014. Web. 19 Dec. 2016.
- Wilson, Angus. *The World of Charles Dickens*. England: Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1970. Print.

Appendix

Map of the Victorian Empire.

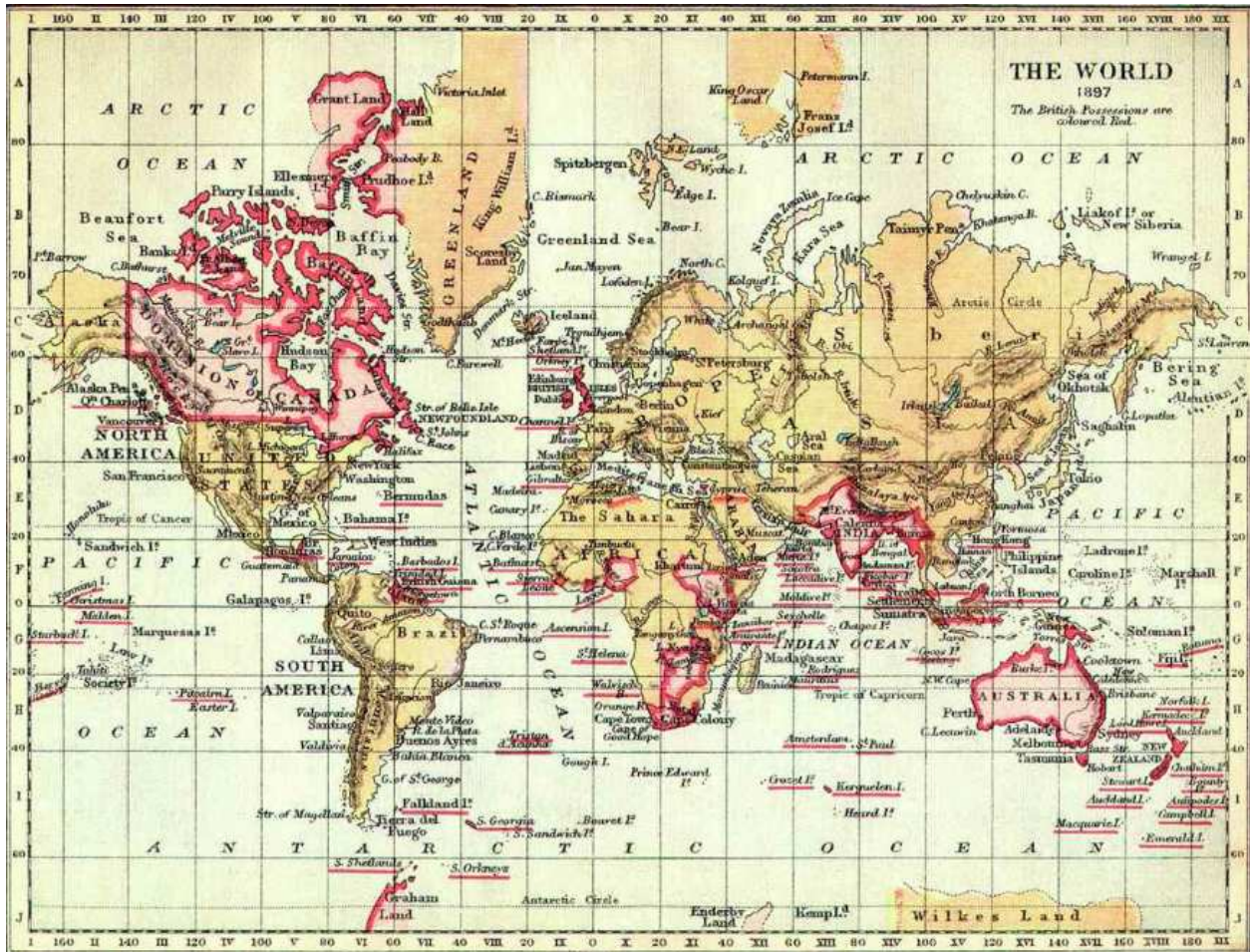


Image taken from *The Victorian School* web page.

<http://www.victorianschool.co.uk/empire.html>

