

**The Invisible Woman: The Story Of Charles Dickens & Nelly Ternan**  
by Claire Tomalin (Knopf, 1995)

Rev. by Naomi Bliven

Tomalin's is a judiciously sympathetic biography of Charles Dickens' mistress, Ellen Lawless Ternan. It recounts, in an easy, conversational style, the facts that survived a conspiracy of concealment by Dickens, Nelly, and their heirs—a conspiracy that eradicated almost every trace of the young woman with whom the middle-aged novelist fell in love. Dickens started burning letters in his lifetime; more bonfires followed his funeral, in 1870, and the funerals of friends and family. Dickens' intimates (John Forster, his friend, biographer, and executor) knew Nelly, and his acquaintances (Longfellow, Browning) knew about her, but in print nineteenth-century discretion prevailed well into the twentieth. Ms. Tomalin admits that there is much we may never learn, but she has managed to recover a real human being. Without exaggerating Nelly's gifts—"In the scale of things Nelly is not an important person. No one would have begun to think about her were it not for Dickens"—the author convinces us that the small, blue-eyed blonde we see in contemporary photographs was an intelligent, cultivated, articulate woman. In this thoughtful account, Dickens' Nelly turns out to be no Dark Lady but a Victorian Good Woman who became mysterious because she thought she was a Fallen Woman.

Before Ellen Ternan disappeared into her lover's life and custody, she was highly visible: she had been an actress. Born in 1839, she was the youngest of three sisters who were the third generation of theatre folk; her family had trouped with the great from the days of Mrs. Siddons. The girls all went on the stage as children, but found it difficult to make the transition from Infant Phenomenon to leading lady. The Ternans were reliable professionals, and mother and daughters (Nelly's father died in 1846) were recommended to Dickens in the summer of 1857, when he was looking for actresses to appear with him in Manchester in a benefit performance of "The Frozen Deep," a melodrama written by Wilkie Collins. Dickens was forty-five to Nelly's eighteen; he was married and the father of nine living children. He had been a celebrity since the publication of "The Pickwick Papers," in 1836, and his vast, enthusiastic international public believed that his life exemplified the domestic virtues that his writing extolled. Dickens' recent biographers agree that after twenty-one years of marriage—he only tolerated his wife, Catherine; he brought her along to see his Manchester triumph, but before 1857 ended he moved out of their bedroom into his dressing room and blocked up the door between. The next year, the Dickenses separated. As the law then stood, he had no grounds for divorce, and Catherine remained his wife until she died.

Ms. Tomalin has found quite a few descriptions of Nelly in her later years: she kept her good looks, and is recalled as widely read in several languages, and interested in literature, politics, music, and the theatre. But except for—references to her beauty Ms. Tomalin has found next to nothing about young Nelly—Nelly as she was when Dickens met her. His scattered lovesick allusions don't describe her; they describe her effect on him. Ms. Tomalin offers plenty of documentation of the Ternans' careers, and, discussing Nelly's theatrical background, properly emphasizes the discipline rather than the glamour. From childhood on, actresses were trained to be punctual and hardworking: when they weren't acting or rehearsing, they were or designing and sewing their costumes.

Still, there were rewards: touring companies were floating islands of sociability, and the theatre offered women not only financial independence but a chance to exercise authority as directors and managers. Nelly played in the classics and also in vaudeville interludes and farce. She learned to dance and sing, and to speak and carry herself like a lady. Yet she wasn't a lady. By definition, a lady did not work for money. And actresses were thought to be unchaste: Ms. Tomalin quotes from an article in the 1797 *Encyclopedia Britannica* which states that merely displaying one's art for pay was a sort of prostitution; as late as 1898, the theatre critic Clement Scott wrote, "It is nearly impossible for a woman to remain pure who adopts the stage as a profession.."

There seems no reason to doubt Nelly's chastity, however, and Ms. Tomalin doesn't think that Mrs. Ternan, who cherished elevated views of the theatre and of the Ternan ancestry,

and had been a faithful wife, put her youngest daughter up for sale. The biographer isn't really sure how Dickens overcame the Ternans' resistance to a liaison that permanently declassd Nelly, though she observes, with all other Dickens students, that Dickens always managed to get his way.

In any case, Dickens began helping the financially hard-pressed Ternans in 1858; he sent Nelly's oldest sister, Fanny, with her mother as chaperon, to study singing in Italy. Then, early in 1859, while Fanny was still abroad, she and Maria, the middle sister, appear as the purchasers of a substantial London house near Regent's Park, which they transferred to Nelly when she reached her majority. There Nelly, who left the stage in 1859, read Dickens' proofs and sang duets with him accompanied by Francesco Berger, who had composed and conducted the incidental music for "The Frozen Deep." Nobody knows where Nelly lived between 1862 and 1865, when she and Dickens were in a railway accident on a train returning from France. [See **Our Mutual Friend**: "Postscript"]. Ms. Tomalin, noting that Dickens spent a great deal of time in France during those years, guesses that Nelly had moved there, possibly to bear him a child in secret. Much, much later, two of Dickens' children, Kate and Henry, told confidants that Nelly did give birth to a son, who died in infancy. There's no documentary proof, and Ms. Tomalin doesn't insist.

Ms. Tomalin suspects that Nelly grew bored after she returned from France. She rented her London house, and waited for Dickens first in a cottage at Slough and later in a grander house at Peckham. For company she had her maid, her dogs, and occasional visits from her mother and sisters; for amusement she read all the serious books of the day. Though Dickens burned most of his pocket diaries, one, for the year 1867, survived by chance—he lost it while visiting New York, and it ended up in the New York Public Library. It shows that he spent about a third of his time on tour, giving his famous readings; a third at his official residence, Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester, where his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth looked after his children and acted as his hostess; and a third with Nelly. Nelly may have been restless and lonely, but she behaved toward Dickens like a concerned, attentive wife; Dickens told his American publisher that she was the only person to notice the symptoms of a mild stroke he suffered during one of his readings. Georgina and Kate recognized her place in his life: they sent for Nelly when Dickens lay dying at Gad's Hill.

AFTER Dickens' death, Nelly entered middle-class society, supported by money he left her and sponsored by her sisters, who had married and left the stage. In 1863, Maria had become Mrs. Rowland Taylor; her husband's family were well-to-do brewers in Oxford. In 1866, Fanny had married Thomas Trollope, whom she had met through Dickens. Trollope, a brother of Anthony, was also a writer, and Fanny herself began writing novels. (Although Dickens later cooled toward Fanny, he and his son Charley serialized several of her novels in their magazine *All the Year Round*.) Nelly helped Fanny on her last book, published in 1895—a biography of her mother-in-law, the writer Frances Trollope. Maria left her husband in 1873, studied art at the Slade and in Italy, and eventually became the Italian correspondent for the London *Standard*; she took an adventurous journey through Tunisia, and published a book about it.

Before Maria decamped, she brought Nelly to a party at Oxford given by an undergraduate, George Wharton Robinson. Though he was twelve years younger than Nelly, Robinson fell in love with her and persuaded her to marry him. They had two children, Geoffrey and Gladys. He invested in a boys' school that Nelly helped him run. She was active in local charities, and performed in fund-raising theatricals. She lied about her age, telling people her family had known Dickens when she was a child; Georgina once came down to award school prizes. But during this period Nelly also confided to the Reverend William Benham, the local vicar, that she had been Dickens' mistress and that "she had come to feel remorse about her relations with him during his lifetime, and that her remorse had made them both miserable; and that she now 'loathed the very thought of this intimacy.'" In 1897, Benham passed these secrets on to the biographer Thomas Wright, but Wright didn't publish them until the nineteen-thirties. (Although some of Dickens' biographers dismiss Wright, Ms. Tomalin points out that after his death a number of details in his assertions were verified by scholars.)

Nelly's husband had a nervous breakdown in 1886, and she sold the school at a loss. The

Robinsons struggled on, teaching and coaching; at one point, they invested in a market garden that failed. All the Ternan family papers came to Nelly, since her sisters were childless. She died, a widow, in 1914. Geoffrey went to war, and didn't examine his inheritance until 1920. His discoveries shocked him. He learned that his mother was ten years older than she had claimed, and that Nelly and his aunts, whom he adored, had all been actresses. Another discovery led him to Henry, Dickens' only surviving son. After their interview, Geoffrey refused to discuss his mother with anyone, and destroyed the papers he had inherited, including, Ms. Tomalin notes with regret, a cache of Trollope documents.

Ms. Tomalin's tone is just right. She never whines, pleads, or harps, and rarely argues. She does take issue with Edmund Wilson's hostile characterization of Nelly, in his essay "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" (it's collected in "The Wound and the Bow") and again in his foreword to Ada Nisbet's 1952 monograph "Dickens and Ellen Ternan." Wilson called Nelly mercenary and commonplace, but his judgment isn't based on specific evidence: it's a by-product of his effort to rescue Dickens' work from the same kind of uncomprehending admiration his personality evoked. Emphasizing the "dark"—the tragic—elements in Dickens' fiction, Wilson ascribed such antiheroines as Estella in "Great Expectations" to Dickens' disappointment with Nelly. Edgar Johnson's two-volume biography of 1952 echoes Wilson. Peter Ackroyd, Dickens' most recent biographer, doesn't disparage Nelly, but follows Katharine Longley in maintaining that the Ternan-Dickens intimacy wasn't sexual. Ms. Tomalin dedicates her book to Miss Longley, who has been generous in sharing her unpublished work, but thanks her only to disagree with her. Ms. Tomalin sees to it that these scholarly disputes don't weary the reader, and she never claims to know more than we *can* know. I think she's correct in refusing to deduce Dickens' writings from his life. Genius surprises: You couldn't predict Beethoven's "Diabelli" variations from the banal waltz he started with. Dickens' situation from 1857 on—that of a rich older man in love with a poor, pretty young woman—is as trite as the Diabelli tune, and I suspect that if it appears in his work his imagination has transformed it beyond our recognition.

The rigor with which Nelly and her sisters suppressed their theatrical pasts and lived out a lie suggests the pathetic fierceness of their girlhood longing for respectability. But they may also have felt pride in themselves and their family, for they kept their clippings. And Nelly didn't burn the evidence. She held on to it throughout her marriage and through all her moves from house to house—in her later years, to ever smaller quarters. Ms. Tomalin notes that Nelly saved a printed copy of Dickens' will, which opens with a bequest to her of a thousand pounds, and is the closest he came to making a public acknowledgment of their relationship. (He seems to have had intermittent impulses to make such an acknowledgment in his lifetime, but his friends always talked him out of it, for fear not only of his losing his audiences but also of wrecking Nelly's reputation.) I wonder if Nelly preserved the evidence in the hope that -Geoffrey—and future generations— would understand.

Nowadays, no doubt, Nelly would have eased her impoverished old age by selling or publishing Dickens' letters. But nowadays we can't read her life story without seeing feminist implications that Nelly didn't: in 1911, she joined the Anti-Suffrage League. Even as we appreciate our distance from Nelly, Ms. Tomalin never allows her to become remote. So this biography reads like a good novel: it feels as if it's not just about strangers; somehow, it's also about us and people we know.