

Foreword

Juliet John, Royal Holloway, University of London

I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place ... and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognisant of everything, and go everywhere, without the least difficulty ...; a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature. ... I want the compiled part of the paper to express the idea of this Shadow's having been in libraries, and among the books referred to. I want him to loom as a fanciful thing all over London; ... an odd, unsubstantial, whimsical, new thing: a sort of previously unthought-of Power going about ... in which people will be perfectly willing to believe, and which is just mysterious and quaint enough to have a sort of charm for their imagination, while it will represent common sense and humanity. I want to express in the title, and in the grasp of the idea to express also, that it is the Thing at everybody's elbow, and in everybody's footsteps. At the window, by the fire, in the street, in the house, from infancy to old age, everyone's inseparable companion.

(Charles Dickens, letter to John Forster, 7 October 1849)

This is Charles Dickens trying to explain to John Forster what he wanted his own journal to achieve: nothing short of an 'omnipresent' influence, intangible yet pervasive, mysterious yet associated with 'common sense and humanity'. There is, arguably, no better summary of Dickens's wildly ambitious vision for his own art and influence than this under-studied passage. Not content with conventional literary influence, Dickens wanted, like the Shadow he describes, to be here, there, and everywhere, yet simultaneously unfathomable, an 'unthought-of Power'. Could this be why his will famously 'conjure[d]' his friends, 'on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial or

testimonial whatsoever' (Forster 859)? As Emily Bell discusses in her Introduction to this volume, the instructions of his will have baffled many; but viewed through the perspective of this earlier letter to Forster, it seems much easier to understand why Dickens would have preferred to figure his influence through the ubiquitous, uncircumscribed, immaterial 'Power' of the Shadow, than through the materially and intellectually circumscribed forms of the monument, memorial or testimonial.

The 'After Dickens' conference held at the University of York in 2016 was one of the best Dickens conferences I have attended in some time, gathering academics from a range of disciplines to reflect on the 'unthought-of Power' of Dickens's legacy. 150 years after his death, Dickens's influence seems obvious and substantial, but its nature is somehow also intangible. As E. M. Forster said of Mr Pickwick many years ago, he seems to be 'round'; yet viewed edgewise is 'not thicker than a gramophone record. But we never get the sideways view' (79). This verdict on Dickens is often seen as damning, but Forster's main point is that Dickens's 'conjuring trick' is unfathomable. Critics are still trying to work it out; moreover, the 'conjuring' seems to underscore not just his characters, but his cultural influence, and indeed the very idea of Dickens. When John Bowen argues in this volume that we are always 'waiting on' and 'waiting for' Dickens, is this because he is always there and not there: a Shadow?

It has not always seemed so: before post-structuralists began to probe the notion that Dickens was a failed realist, and biographers began to strip away the layers of biographical myth-making that Dickens himself had himself set in train, the author had perhaps seemed more knowable. And, perhaps, more limited, because what was known was limited, lacking the 'sideways view'. It is perhaps surprising that widespread critical attention to Dickens's broader influence on British and global culture is a relatively recent phenomenon, coming after the Dickens of post-structuralism and biographical revisionism: always evident in pockets, Dickens's cultural influence has crystallised as perhaps the most dynamic area of current Dickens studies since the 2012 bicentenary, when the question of what Dickens meant to different kinds of people around the world garnered global attention. The question of what is, perhaps, easier to answer than why – and even where – however: why the influence of Dickens extended so far beyond, as well as after, Dickens.

As Emily Bell argues in her Introduction, critical studies of Dickensian afterlives tend to take either a panoramic or a very focused view, examining specific intertextual relationships. Both approaches have their value, but the ideal would surely be synergy between the macro and the micro view. Building on her work as organiser of 'After Dickens', Bell takes us here on a journey towards synergy, bookending the collection with her own fine, macroscopic Introduction and the pairing of her subtle and considered chapter on biofiction with her former supervisor John Bowen's characteristically clever literary and philosophical take on 'Waiting for Dickens'. In between, the standard of the chapters is uniformly high: there is a specific emphasis on *reading* Dickens and intertextuality – not

just literary intertextuality but on screen (Laurena Tsudama's excellent chapter on *The Wire*) and on stage (Michael Eaton's illuminating take, as a practitioner, on adapting *Great Expectations* for the stage). Global Dickens is here: Kathy Rees on Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Katie Bell on William Faulkner, Rob Jacklosky on Donna Tartt. There are, inevitably, chapters that interrogate Dickens's writing in relation to gender (Claire O'Callaghan and Pete Orford; Francesca Arnavas through the lens of sci-fi). Perhaps only Joanna Hofer-Robinson's strong leading chapter on the influence of Dickens's Jacob's Island on sanitary form and the cultural memory of this area of London takes us clearly beyond the intertextual. There were many fine papers from the originary conference that I would like to have seen represented here – not least, Kamilla Elliott's keynote which analysed Dickens's appearance in *Assassin's Creed* (2015), Geraldine Meaney's 'Bleak House and Social Network Analysis: Dickens through the Macroscope' and Jan-Melissa Schramm's 'Charles Dickens and the Postcolonial Imagination' – but this is simply a comment on strength in depth of the work Bell's conference solicited, and yet more evidence that 'waiting' is a perennial state for Dickens critics.

A note (or more) of caution. Before writing this Foreword, I re-read John Sutherland's Foreword to a volume I co-edited with Alice Jenkins exactly 20 years ago, at the start of my career. The book was *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (2000), and the conference, 'Victorian Studies: Into the 21st Century', was designed as a millennial stock taking, but also a future-focused collective conversation about the state of the field. In what he called a 'cross-grained' comment, Sutherland made the point 'that more "reading" of Victorian fiction is desirable. Forget rereading.' Shortly after, he lamented the canonical balance of the conference, listing the main authors discussed, including 'Dickens and Dickens and Dickens' (xi). His point, at that millennial moment, was that only certain Victorian authors were being read (admittedly those whose texts 'reward rereading and revisiting' [xi]), and more minor authors were being lost. Most Victorianists would agree that digital tools, along with the work of scholars like Sutherland and collectives like the Victorian Popular Fiction Association, have greatly expanded critical focus to include more 'popular' fiction in the academy over the last 20 years. But something else has also been happening: the decline of reading more generally, and the narrowing of the Victorian canon in a soundbite generation, at both schools and universities, to shorter texts – in the case of Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843) (Dickens's most adapted and influential text, though not a 'novel') and *Oliver Twist* (1837–39). In 2000, Sutherland asked if criticism helps us to "know" more about Victorian fiction?' (xii), putting the question: 'if you had a time machine capable of forward or reverse travel, and wanted – by some absurd whim – to use it to find out more about Victorian fiction, which way would you go?' He concludes, apocalyptically: 'I accept that we see literature more clearly as time passes, but the clarity is at the wrong end of the telescope. Textures and the feel of the original are lost. At some point, it will be lost altogether' (xii).

Leaving aside the obvious theoretical questions these comments raise about who creates literary meaning and how, they raise specific questions for those concerned with analysing Dickens after Dickens: will Dickens always be 'known' (not in a philosophical sense, but in the sense of being read, and culturally influential)? If so, will he be known mainly through mediation? I am not the only critic to argue that already Dickens is known more through the screen than through books among the general public, for example. Running through this volume is a consistent engagement with the role of neo-Victorianism in knowing Dickens, and indeed the Victorians. Though Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010) are usually credited with being the first to formally define the neo-Victorian as a contemporary genre which engages critically and self-consciously with the Victorians, it is interesting that Sutherland himself was the first to identify 'a strikingly new topic of critical discussion' in his Foreword to *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, describing the topic as 'those "rereadings" of Victorian fiction that result in contemporary rewriting,' arguing that 'Victorian novels, as Robin Gilmour argued, can be written in the 1990s'. Gilmour's groundbreaking essay in the volume, 'Using the Victorians: The Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction,' distinguishes between the 'more self-conscious' use of the Victorians in the last third of the 20th century and 'the straightforward historical novel with a period setting' in a way that anticipates Heilmann and Llewellyn's later definition (189).

The relevance of this genealogical detour is not simply to establish that Gilmour and Sutherland were the first to draw attention to what we now call neo-Victorianism, but to pinpoint the importance of why their contribution to identifying a field has been somewhat erased: most obviously, they did not coin the term 'neo-Victorian'. Indeed, Sutherland calls this new kind of fiction 'Victorian', even though he is writing about novelists like John Fowles and Michèle Roberts, who are commonly labelled 'neo-Victorian' today. The difference in terminology captures a difference of emphasis: Sutherland assumes that contemporary novelists who use the Victorians are working (even if self-consciously) with them and not against them, consciously, and neo-Victorianism criticism can have a tendency to associate self-reflexivity with a narrative of contemporary political progress away from the originary text. The best 'neo-Victorian' essays in the current volume, like Gilmour's foundational essay in this field, embrace the creative tensions and mutuality between past and present, eschewing easy and superficial presentism. It is not a revelation to discover that Dickensian gender politics are more dubious than those of most self-respecting contemporary writers and adapters. Neo-Victorian criticism is most rewarding when it teaches us about the contemporary and the past, rather than using the present to 'other' the past, and when it yokes texts to contexts and cultural formations. There is perhaps more to do on the latter, a need to harness more routinely audience research methodologies taken from sociology, screen and cultural studies, as well as the evidential focus of book historians, to probe the claims made for neo-Victorian politics

more rigorously. Literary critics can tend to assume that a text's effect/affect is circumscribed by the individual acts of interpretation of critics and reviewers: but what is the audience (in terms of numbers and demographic reach) of radical revisionist texts? How do readers/audience members at large see the Victorians through neo-Victorian texts? And is it only the screen (e.g. *The Wire*, Sarah Waters' adaptations, almost inevitably gaming) that will command the cultural and political 'reach' of Dickens in his heyday? For Dickensians, in the sphere of cultural production, how can the present and the Dickensian past work together for the benefit of time 'yet to come'?

Is the right concluding question, ultimately, how will Dickens always continue after Dickens, or will Dickens continue after Dickens? Current evidence suggests confidence but not complacency, and if we understand better the shifting morphology of Dickens's legacy, his legacy becomes more future proof. Emily Bell starts this book with G. K. Chesterton's words from his 'Note on the Future of Dickens': 'we have a long way to travel before we get back to what Dickens meant' (150). His temporal play brings to mind Sutherland's time travel 'conundrum', and suggests our answer: 'if you had a time machine capable of forward or reverse travel, and wanted – by some absurd whim – to use it to find out more about Victorian fiction, which way would you go?'. As the circular title to this volume suggests, the answer is both ways.

Works cited

- Chesterton, G. K. *Charles Dickens*. Wordsworth Editions, 2007.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, The Pilgrim Edition*, vol. 5, 1847–1849. Edited by Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding. Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Pelican/Penguin, 1964.
- Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. Edited by J. W. T. Ley. Cecil Palmer, 1928.
- Gilmour, Robin. 'Using the Victorians: The Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction.' *Rereading Victorian Fiction*. Edited by Alice Jenkins and Juliet John. Palgrave, 2000, pp. 189–200.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Jenkins, Alice and Juliet John. *Rereading Victorian Fiction*. Foreword by John Sutherland. Palgrave, 2000.