

Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan K. Martin. *Colonial Dickens: What Australians Made of the World's Favourite Writer*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012, 165 pp. ISBN: 9781 9218 75700 AU\$ 39.95 <http://www.scholarly.info/book/313/>

Charles Dickens never visited Australia. This was despite his interest in, and enthusiastic promotion of the Australian colonies in his *Household Words*, or the fact that he heartedly encouraged two of his sons—Edward and Alfred—to immigrate to Australia to seek their fortunes along with several (in)famous characters from his novels. The desire among colonial Australians for Dickens to make an antipodean voyage manifested in constant pleas and numerous rumours of his imminent arrival. However, as Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan K. Martin eloquently explore in *Colonial Dickens* his words did steam across the globe and made their way into the minds, culture and everyday life of colonial Australians. Unlike previous studies of Dickens and Australia, this book explores what colonial Australians thought of Dickens, rather than what Dickens thought of the emerging southern nation. Mirmohamadi and Martin also read Dickens as both a marker and maker of Empire; as a widely utilised lens to understand and make sense of the newness and strangeness of the Australian colonies as a place both similar and different to the mother country.

Colonial Dickens builds on Mirmohamadi and Martin's previous monograph *Sensational Melbourne* (2011) which examined Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Victorian classic of sensation fiction *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and its reception and reiteration in Marvellous Melbourne. Like this previous collaboration, meticulous and original archival research informs *Colonial Dickens*; from unpublished diaries, journals and letters, to in-depth studies of metropolitan and regional newspapers, government reports and largely forgotten colonial novels. There is a generous use of images throughout the book (including several colour plates) of paintings, sketches, engravings and photographs. In addition, snippets of Dickens's novels punctuate the analysis at appropriate times, illuminating key ideas and moments. Martin and Mirmohamadi also evoke one of Dickens' favourite books *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights* and its storyteller Shahrazad as a structuring device, and in this respect their study mimics the idea of telling and retelling stories by offering numerous enchanting and entertaining encounters of Dickens and his words. My favourite is the story of Ellen Campbell whose love and devotion of Dickens saw her using her own flesh to collect leeches for a local surgeon in order to purchase a first edition copy of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44).

In addition to an introduction and conclusion, *Colonial Dickens* contains seven chapters. The first sets up the study by examining the ways in which Dickens's works were 'transported to, then circulated, sold and read in colonial Australia' in order to cogently claim that nineteenth-century Australia was a 'Dickens-reading country' (4). This initial idea is expanded in Chapter 2 by exploring how colonial Australians read their world—from the local to the global—through Dickens's writing. According to Martin and Mirmohamadi, the cultural reach and pervasiveness of 'the world's favourite writer' highlights how he 'provided a way of reading the colonial everyday' (5). Martin and Mirmohamadi argue that Dickens's words were not only essential to the 'transmission of English and Englishness', but also how they provided a series of familiar 'ready-made associations and images' for colonial readers that

was extensively utilised by local print and visual cultures (28). For example, Dickensian images, characters and themes were mobilised by Australians to understand and read debates about penal reform, urban and rural poverty, colonisation, the rapid growth of the goldfields, and ethnic and racial conflicts between white settlers and indigenous and Chinese cultures.

The following three chapters take a more localised look at Dickens in Australia. Chapter 3 explores a tale of two cities with 'Dickens's London in Melbourne', while Chapter 5 turns to Sydney to examine how *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and especially the notorious figure of Fagin, gets re-imagined in relation to antipodean crime and poverty. Chapter 4 offers an exercise in horizontal reading with its focus on Dickens in the regional Queensland press. This chapter reads a single issue or page of several country newspapers for the ways in which Dickensian images and associations seep across and outside of their strict columns. Such an approach enables a rich juxtaposing and contextualising of Dickens and his work in relation to advertising, local events and how Dickens informed white settler understandings about indigenous Australians.

The vibrant world of colonial theatre is the subject of Chapter 6. Martin and Mirmohamadi find a wealth of Dickensian productions tailored and remade for the antipodes. In particular they discuss the ways in which Jo the crossing sweeper from *Bleak House* (1852-53) provided a powerfully poignant and popular cross-dressed role for colonial women performers. The importance of Dickens to the transmission of English and Englishness in Australia is elaborated further in Chapter 7 with its focus on elocution and education. The concluding chapter examines the afterlife of Dickens and his work, from séances, life-like wax figures to a new reading of Peter Carey's postcolonial rewriting of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) in the novel *Jack Maggs* (1997).

Colonial Dickens offers a valuable and original contribution to Australian literary studies, and perhaps more importantly, charts new ways of understanding Australian literary cultures as not a nationalistic point of difference from the imperial centre but rather as a complex negotiation of the local and the global.

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