Luise Wolff

Postcolonial Responses to Charles Dickens

Appropriating Dickens in Contemporary Australian and New Zealand Novels

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Introduction

When we consider contemporary writing from Australia and New Zealand, the work of Charles Dickens is no immediate association that comes to mind. Still, a number of Australian and New Zealand writers have alluded to Dickens in the past decades. These allusions are more or less explicit. There are those writers who create sequels of *Great Expectations*, and there are others who refer to Dickens rather in passing. Five novels written by Australian and New Zealand authors between 1990 and 2008 show a sustained engagement with Dickens: Carmel Bird's *The Bluebird Café* (1990), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights* (2004), Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008). This study seeks to explore the intertextual relations between these five novels and Charles Dickens by tracing the following questions: What is particularly interesting about Dickens for contemporary Australian and New Zealand authors? How is Dickens appropriated in these Australian and New Zealand narratives? Do the five authors employ similar strategies in appropriating Dickens? In what other ways do the texts possibly resemble each other?

While New Zealand does not feature in any Dickens novel, Dickens showed a considerable interest in Australia. Accordingly, the country appears in many of Dickens's novels in different configurations. In turn, Dickens has been influencing Australian writers since the inception of Australian settler literature in the nineteenth century. In Australia and New Zealand, Dickens is both a cultural icon and the representative of a significant period in the two countries' histories. At the same time, his novels as well as his biography address issues that appear still relevant for contemporary Australia and New Zealand. Both the historical and the contemporary Dickens is thus a significant figure for Australian and New Zealand novelists today. The following brief outline of these mutual influences should help to understand the context in which the five novels have to be placed. It may further provide possible first answers to the question why Dickens continues to captivate the imagination of contemporary Australian and New Zealand authors.

Australia in Dickens's Work

Dickens lived at a time when Australia underwent significant historical changes. Accordingly, his attitude towards Australia changed throughout his life. From the 1830s to the 1870s, Australia developed from a penal colony into a settler colony as transportation to New South Wales ceased in 1840 (Litvack, "Context" 30).[1] The country drew increasingly free settlers to it, particularly during the time of the gold rushes in the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time, an Australian cultural and political identity started to emerge (Stewart 8). Dickens was thus a contemporary to "the decades in which New South Wales transformed itself from a forlorn penitentiary on the backside

[1] Transportation continued after 1840 to Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land (Litvack, "Context" 42). Altogether, transportation to Australia ceased in 1867 (Moore 14).

of the world into a prosperous colonial settlement with aspirations to nationhood", as Anthony Hassall puts it (135). It is perhaps illustrative for this profound image change from a penal colony to a land of opportunities that Dickens sent two of his sons to Australia, Alfred D'Orsay Tennyson and Edward Bulwer Lytton (Plorn) (Stewart 26).

Yet what images of Australia existed in Victorian Britain? In the 1840s and 1850s, Australia was primarily associated with stereotypes in the British population. Next to the "stockrider in the outback" and the "working-class settler", the stereotype of "the convict – principally imagined as an emanicipist" was predominant in the British imaginary, as Leon Litvack explains[2] ("Context" 35-36). A particular version of the third stereotype is the figure of the returned convict, which appears repeatedly in Victorian fiction (Thieme, *Writing Back* 106), for example in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Dombey and Son*. The figure of the returned convict illustrates the uneasy relationship between Australia and Britain, as Kirsty Reid points out (58). In Britain, convicts were "systematically demonised". The abolition of transportation amplified this process, leading to a "moral panic" that "more firmly associated the criminal class with racial otherness by linking convicts with the debased 'rookeries' of London and, in particular, the Irish" (Reid 59). Moreover, the convict was per se a figure who challenged the boundaries of empire: while coloniser and colonised were usually clearly distinguished from each other, convicts threatened this distinction as British subjects who stayed not infrequently in touch with their families in Britain (Reid 64-66).

How was Dickens influenced by these images of Australia? Primarily two views of Australia can be found in Dickens's work: Australia appears as a prison colony to which Britain sends its convict, and as a "New World Arcadia"[3] (Thieme, *Writing Back* 103). While Alan Dilnot and Ken Stewart note how little Australia appears in Dickens's fiction despite his demonstrable interest in the country (Dilnot 22; Stewart 26), Australia still features – albeit marginally – throughout Dickens's work. These Australian references in Dickens's work present one possible link between contemporary Australian and New Zealand writers and Dickens.

Dickens's early works mirror the popular perception of Australia as a place where unwanted citizens were shipped (Litvack, "Context" 30). This image of Australia as a penal colony is reproduced in *The Pickwick Papers,* in *Oliver Twist* or in *Nicholas Nickleby.* Yet, Australia itself does not feature in these texts. In the story of "The Convict's Return" in *The Pickwick Papers*, for example, Australia is mentioned only in passing as "the distant land of his bondage and infamy" (PP 73).[4] The focus of the

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2 Litvack draws on Coral Lansbury's analysis of British stereotypes of Australia in *Arcady in Australia: The Evocation of Australia in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. See also Archibald 68.

3 See Lansbury for a detailed discussion of the Arcadian image of Australia.

4 In referring to Dickens's novels, the following standard abbreviations are used throughout this study: PP (*The Pickwick Papers*), OT (*Oliver Twist*), OCS (*The Old Curiosity Shop*), DC (*David Copperfield*) and GE (*Great Expectations*).