

## Crossing the Field

LYDIA WEVERS

I recently retired from my job as Director of the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. It wasn't an easy decision after 17 years in the role. One of the most exhausting parts of it was clearing out my office. It wasn't so much the papers, it was the bookshelves. And then I had to work out what to do with them when I got them home, trying to impose what Walter Benjamin called "the mild boredom of order."<sup>1</sup> I wish. I would like to be mildly bored if it meant my books were ordered. But what is the order? I can't see myself implementing the Dewey system, I don't want to alphabetize my New Zealand books or my Australian collection into the larger conglomerate, and what about poetry, children's books and crime fiction? Luckily my house has bookshelves in a lot of its rooms so I can impose a geographical and architectural rationale: crime fiction in the spare room, for example. But the question of books has exercised me: what to keep, what to take down to Vinnies, what to put where. I don't think in tidy categories and nor do my books, and in the course of thinking about this lecture the part books play in our lives seemed germane. Benjamin's essay is not about the kind of haphazard bookbuyer and reader that I am, it is about book collecting. He had a rather stringent rule at one point in his life which resulted in what he called the militant age of his library—no more than two or three shelves—because no book was allowed to enter unless he had not read it. Needless to say, I have never had such a rule. At the end of his essay Benjamin says that "ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects." Not, he goes to say, "that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."<sup>2</sup>

But is that true? Does physically owning a book involve it in an intimate relationship if you haven't read it? And don't books live in both ways? There is no book without a reader, as Robert Escarpit pointed out long ago.<sup>3</sup> When you hold a book in your hand all you hold is the paper—the book is somewhere else. But it is also true that a reader lives in books, and it is this kind of existence that I want to talk about tonight, the kind of history that brings the resources of bookishness into play.

Historians no longer tend to be literary persons on the side, as they were once. J. C. Beaglehole, Keith Sinclair and W. H. Oliver, historians of roughly the same generation, all wrote poetry, memoir or essays. I find this interesting, though I don't really have any explanation for it. The idea that literature is history and, more radically, that literature might shape what we understand history to be, has fallen out of favour, as if history is obliged to haul a chain separating itself from anything that is not history, which of course begs a lot of questions. I am a literary scholar who thinks of herself primarily now as an historian. James Belich, at the launch of my 2010 book about the Brancepeth Library, *Reading on the Farm*, announced that I had "joined the other side." And perhaps being asked to give this lecture means I have, but the field in which I like to work is messy and does not divide itself neatly.

My title is intended to suggest that scholarship is always a form of movement, and it happens in a space of knowledge, often a blurry space marked with many crossings. Whether that space is called history, or literature, or geography, or science, it is shaped by and reflects other ways of knowing. I hope to suggest some of that this evening.

When I thought about how to order the books in my house, something became very clear—that the majority of them are fiction. Sometimes these books count as literature, often not, but these are the books I have found hardest to throw away, because if I haven't read them I think I will,

and if I have read them they are part of my emotional biography; more than that, they form part of the landscape in which I live, nineteenth-century London, provincial France, New York, pre-war Japan, post-war Greece, the Russian steppes, German apartment buildings, Bath assembly hall—for other readers of fiction, there's a quiz in that list. And of course I am not alone. Settlers emigrating to New Zealand in the nineteenth century were advised to include books in their luggage, and, as J. E. Traue has shown, New Zealand appears to have achieved, within some fifty years of settlement, the highest number of libraries per capita ever reached in any country or state in the world.<sup>4</sup> We have long cherished the idea that we are a nation of readers, and though that proposition is perhaps less self-evident now, it has a demonstrable history of evidence.

When I was in my twenties, I inherited some books from a bachelor friend of my mother's. His name was Jack Bennett and he farmed at Bennett's Hill in the Wairarapa. The books had belonged to his grandfather, who ordered them in the 1880s from England—one volume editions of Dickens and Thackeray, beautiful, fat, leatherbound books, for reading, but perhaps even more for keeping and handing on to grandchildren. For it is a truth universally acknowledged that books are not only about reading what is inside their covers; they furnish a room, they facilitate intellectual and cultural colonisation, they are the mulch which shapes class and race as in the recent protests at Cambridge about the English curriculum, and they act as a kind of totem against the forces of decay, eloquently described in the devastated post-apocalypse world of Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, which is about a travelling band of Shakespearean players performing *King Lear*.<sup>5</sup>

There are an extraordinary number of Victorian novels in which a down-and-out tramp, usually caught in a storm or dying of pneumonia, is offered shelter by a good Samaritan, who discovers that in his threadbare possessions is a carefully preserved classical text. The text is almost always in Latin or Greek and shows the marks of many readings and what the rescuers realise, a turning point of the plot, is that they have on their hands a scion of the upperclasses, who has been cast out in some way. The tattered book, or books, is a class guarantee, or a letter of introduction—it vouches for the carrier, both culturally and socially. It reverses preconceptions and, in novels at least, fortunes. These scenes are not confined to novels. The Beetham family brought their collection of classical texts and other books with them to the Wairarapa when they emigrated in 1856, and it was clear in my study of the readers at Brancepeth station in the 1890s that some of them, fallen on hard times, preserved their books at all costs and clung to reading as a lifeline of selfhood.

Books play into many forms of social and other forms of distinction, and what you read is always part of broader discourses and sensibilities.

In his 2002 memoir *Looking for the Phoenix* Bill Oliver describes his Depression childhood, which was pretty thin pickings.<sup>6</sup> The family was on the dole when his father was out of work, the children wore hated clothes cut down from adult suits, and Bill remembered being disappointed by frugal birthdays. But in comparison to many others, as he says, he did not remember ever being hungry or cold. Oliver turned 10 as the Depression drew to a close, which meant he did not have to enter the workforce like his older brother and sister, but remained in the education system. He had the good fortune to come from a reading family, people of the book. As a child he read English public school novels and moral Victorian tales like *Eric: or Little by Little* by F. W. Farrar, novels about how boys should and do behave; and he remembered memorizing parts of *Our Nation's Story*, a history of Britain, which formed the centre of the history curriculum in New Zealand primary schools from the 1920s till the 1940s.

Oliver's 1960 *The Story of New Zealand* shows some traces of this reading diet.<sup>7</sup> It opens in a setting that signals the kind of narrative history to come: remote and magnificent islands, a challenging beautiful and empty land (except for millions of moas which seems now a bit of an overstatement), a land waiting for the first adventurous men to arrive. The story as a whole is progressivist and mostly about men. Literature occupies a few pages at the end, and is perhaps the most dramatically progressivist part of the narrative. Oliver writes "since the onset of the depression, literature and the arts in New Zealand have become reasonably mature and independent," and "poets, novelists, essayists and historians have begun to dwell in the land as natives."<sup>8</sup> He says New Zealand literature produced in the nineteenth century makes "timid gestures of conformity" (he means writers like John Barr, Jessie Mackay, Alfred Domett and Thomas Bracken). According to Oliver, the "tiny minorities" who read and wrote in the nineteenth century (generically categorised as men) dallied with a literature which reminded them of the "felicities, the soft harmonies, the nostalgically distant memorials of the English scene."<sup>9</sup> It wasn't until the depression provoked New Zealanders into a "need for self-understanding" that they were obliged to look closely at a "real society," and it is this turn to a "meaningful point of departure," in Oliver's words, that was widely heralded as a coming of age.<sup>10</sup>

Oliver is not alone, of course, in making these judgements. In their book *Maoriland* Jane Stafford and Mark Williams wittily term these attitudes towards nineteenth-century New Zealand writing a "culture of embarrassment."<sup>11</sup> Such judgements set in place canonical criteria for what is really literature and what is really New Zealand, and, of course, as with any other field, there are large areas of exclusion. Stafford and Williams have challenged the received wisdom that nineteenth-century literature produced in New Zealand is embarrassingly bad by showing how writers like Jessie Mackay looked to the "political and literary Celticism of nineteenth-century Scotland and Ireland, as a template for the emerging literary nationalism of Maoriland."<sup>12</sup> One of the things illustrated by Stafford and Williams's study is the way that nineteenth-century New Zealand writers drew on the literary models and conventions of their time: Romanticism; the fashion for epic poems in the manner of Ossian, the invented ancient poet known as the "Homer of the North"; sentimental ballads, to represent a country they perceived to be without history, or at least without a history they could accept on its own terms. But they were not unaware that colonial history as it was unfolding was not entirely heroic or glorious. Jessie Mackay wrote a satirical version of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" about Parihaka;

Over the ferny plain  
Marched the Twelve Hundred.  
"Forward!" the Colonel said:  
Was there a man dismayed?  
No, for the heroes knew  
*There was no danger.*  
Theirs not to reckon why,  
Theirs not to bleed or die,  
Theirs but to trample by,  
Each dauntless ranger.<sup>13</sup>

The reliance of nineteenth-century New Zealand writers on the literary conventions and modes of their culture of origin illustrates among other things that literature is a collectivity. Literature can and does calibrate the social order and gender or racial discrimination, it embodies and embeds preferred stereotypes and registers, but it is also a shared imaginative participation, a cultural code, an emotional bond and a form of identity. It is the form of identity that colonial

pākehā New Zealanders found in their reading that I would like to turn to now, drawing on some earlier work I have done about Dickens.

In his 2011 book *Becoming Dickens* Robert Douglas-Fairhurst said that no writer of any period was more closely identified with the time and place in which he lived than Dickens.<sup>14</sup> This close identification with London, England, and the Victorian century is instrumental in the powerful presence and importance of Dickens in the world outside Britain. The synchronicity of his writing career with Victoria's reign and the colonization of New Zealand is striking. *Pickwick* appeared in twenty monthly parts from April 1836 to November 1837 and was published as a single volume that year. Victoria became Queen on 20 June 1837. On 22 May that year Edward Gibbon Wakefield chaired the first meeting of the New Zealand Association in London.

Dickens had no firsthand experience of Australia or New Zealand, but he sent his sons Alfred and Edward to Australia in the 1860s to get them away from idleness in London, and he contemplated coming to New Zealand himself in 1847, to start a magazine. After scorching reviews of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life* and *A Child's History of England* in *The Times*, which used phrases such as a "twaddling manifestation of silliness," Dickens "dreamed of Timeses all night," and, he wrote in his journal, "Disposed to go to New Zealand and start a magazine."<sup>15</sup> Seven years before, in 1841, Dickens had enquired about jobs in Wellington for his brother Alfred, a railway engineer,<sup>16</sup> and by 1847 a number of people he knew, including Thomas Arnold, Mary Taylor and Alfred Domett, had emigrated. Dickens's thought of emigration to Wellington was fleeting and really an expression of pique, but it is one of those "what if" questions that make you imagine history from a different place.

On 16 May, 1840, the *New Zealand Gazette* carried a small advertisement on the front page.

The Pickwick Club of New Zealand, for members and friends only, will meet every Tuesday evening at Mr W. Elsdon's Commercial Inn and Tavern. The Chair to be taken at 7 o'clock precisely.

The Pickwick Club of Port Nicholson is believed to be the first Dickens society established outside Great Britain.<sup>17</sup> What is remarkable about the date of the Pickwick Club is that New Zealand formally became a British Colony on 6 February and the Pickwick Club announced its existence a mere three months later, less than four months since the New Zealand Company settlers first piled the beach at Petone with their sea-battered belongings. On 22 January, the *Aurora*, the first of the New Zealand Company's ships carrying settlers, arrived in Wellington harbour, followed in quick succession by the *Oriental*, the *Duke of Roxburgh*, the *Bengal Merchant*, the *Glenbervie* and the *Adelaide*. By the end of 1840, 1200 settlers had arrived, lured by the promise of land and the New Zealand Company's vision of a settlement based on Edward Gibbon Wakefield's theory of systematic colonization, a scheme with a Dickensian flavour, in which the balance between capital, land, labour and class was regulated by charging what he called a "sufficient price" for land. Wakefield's intention was to create a two tier society: colonists with capital to invest, many of whom turned out to be Eatanswill absentee landlords like the ones in the *Pickwick Papers*; and emigrants, who would provide the labour force for them, while earning the capital to purchase land. Needless to say, the scheme had many flaws, but the settlement was promoted relentlessly by the New Zealand Company. It is perhaps consistent with Wakefield's sense of essential social dynamics that one of the very first things the colonists did was found the Pickwick Club.

It is, I think, remarkable that Dickens and the Pickwick Club had such a prominent place in the new settlement. The settlers had been less than six months on a foreign shore, been flooded out

and had to move to the other side of a deep and stormy harbour, and one of their first acts of social organisation was to materialize a fictional club from a novel by a 28-year-old man whose career thus far consisted of four books. The founders of the club were a mix of “colonists” such as Lord Henry Petre and Charles Heaphy the explorer, both Directors of the New Zealand Company, and local merchants, like William Elsdon, proprietor of the Commercial Hotel where the meetings were held, and William Lyon, a bookseller trained in Scotland. The *New Zealand Gazette* described the newly formed Club as having a considerable number of members on foundation, and had this to say about its first meeting:

To our friends in England, this cannot fail to awaken the most pleasing sensations; as it tends to prove, that in this remote region of the globe—this land of savages—Englishmen relish the inimitable works of “Boz,” and that they desire to spread the fame of the author in their adopted land. On Tuesday evening last the first meeting of the Club took place when the rules and regulations were submitted to the members and agreed to without a dissentient voice. Several toasts were given from the Chair.<sup>18</sup>

The salient clue to the Pickwick Club’s core value lies in the claim that “in ... this land of savages ... Englishmen relish the inimitable works of ‘Boz.’”

George H. Ford has claimed that to the majority of his nineteenth-century readers, the *Pickwick Papers* was the most likeable book ever written by Dickens.<sup>19</sup> Its readership was enormous and diverse. As a review in the *National Magazine* noted in 1837, all classes read Boz, and its successes quickly translated into shop windows full of Pickwick Chintzes and Sam Weller corduroys. The founding members of the Pickwick Club of Port Nicholson were part of this avid readership, enchanted and amused by Pickwick and the immortal Sam Weller, but it is not hard to see some other correspondences between their colonising endeavours and the comic epic of the Pickwick Club, particularly if the novel is given its full title: *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club containing a Faithful Record of the Perambulations, Perils, Travels and Sporting Transactions of the Corresponding Members*.

The great traveller Pickwick, whose journeys, we are told in the opening chapter, provide the observations that fill the voluminous Transactions of the Pickwick Club, stands comically in the place of explorers and travellers like Mungo Park, Joseph Banks, and James Bruce. William Colenso wrote in later life that when he was young he “devoured” the works of Mungo Park and other explorers, and his accounts of his own exploratory journeys round the East Cape in 1839 mimic the narrative strategies of Park’s famous 1797 book *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*.<sup>20</sup> The paper Pickwick gives to the club echoes Royal Society instruction books for travellers such as Colonel Jackson’s 1841 *What to Observe*,<sup>21</sup> and pokes fun at “scientific” papers with its discussion of the origins of the Hampden ponds and observations on the theory of tittlebats.

The founders of the Pickwick Club of New Zealand were young men who had themselves recently completed an arduous and uncertain sea voyage to the other side of the world and arrived, no doubt as they thought heroically, in an unknown place. For them the figure of Pickwick, travelling comfortably and safely in familiar parts of the British Isles, must have had comic piquancy, but perhaps it was also a comfortingly benign version of why they had done it. They too were part of the great enterprise Pickwick represents, enlarging the sphere of observation to the advancement of knowledge, as the novel puts it, and now the journey was achieved, the club could begin its Pickwickian work, which casts colonialism in perhaps its least threatening light.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Pickwick, with his gigantic brain and circular spectacles, is surrounded by the susceptible Tupman, the poetic Snodgrass and the sporting Winkle, while the regulations of the Club are read and recorded, and minutes of the ensuing discussion taken down. It is a deeply reassuring depiction of social order, despite, or perhaps because of, Dickens's lampoon of the Royal Society. Dickens's satirical treatment of club protocols is like a formula joke—it entrenches the formula. What can be a clearer sign of normal, civilised, British life than a meeting with minutes? The inaugural meeting of the Pickwick Club of New Zealand consisted of establishing rules and regulations before drinking toasts to the Queen, Colonel Wakefield, and the New Zealand Land Company, finishing with "Prosperity to the settlement in Port Nicholson." But perhaps they looked too much like the original—which was really a drinking club—because an article in the *New Zealand Gazette*, the week following the inaugural meeting, felt called upon to rebut the idea that the Pickwick Club was a "convivial society."<sup>22</sup> In the manner of its namesake, the Club published the text of an address by a Mr Douglas which claimed that "the Society is entitled to approbation not censure." Mr Douglas proposed that, as a "means of giving a more elevated tone to our Society than the mere thoughtless merriment of a passing hour," the Society should devote a portion of its funds to the purchase of periodical publications "best calculated for the spread of information among their number," and a further portion to a Medal, to be awarded to the best production in prose or verse by a member of the Club. It is perhaps an interesting paradox that a comic novel which makes fun of many dearly held British institutions should also be the source of these earnest ambitions to reproduce them in the shanty towns of empire, but as the Pickwick's Club first public announcement suggests, in a land of savages what makes an Englishman is his relish of Boz.

In August 1840, the Pickwick Club published a first-quarterly report in the *New Zealand Gazette*. Floridly rhetorical in the manner of its namesake, the report recalled the "trackless waste of waters" the settlers journeyed over and the "rude inhospitable desert" which greeted them on arrival. On the windswept beach the Pickwick Club was born, as a means of "forming some bond of union" to unite the "scattered elements of our society."<sup>23</sup> Membership included the greater portion of the "talent and respectability" of the settlement. Despite the Committee's claim (tellingly full of adjectives) that the Club united the "gay and thoughtless son of Erin," the "calm reflecting Scotchman" and the "blunt and manly Englishman," linking the club to Dickens and to Pickwick suggests what Catherine Hall has noted, the primacy of Englishness in the construction of a British identity.<sup>24</sup> The committee proudly anticipated the "great and salutary" influence the Club was destined to exert and noted that more than 100 books had already been donated to its library.<sup>25</sup>

The self-improving and literary ambitions of the Club reflect the ways in which colonists thought of themselves as loyal and devoted members of the parent culture who happened to be at the end of a longer journey than their fellow Britons. Benedict Anderson has famously described this as the horizontal comradeship of print culture. Reading is always an act of participation, but what stands out about Dickens is that his readers wanted to materialise his fictional club, and indeed many of his characters, in their social fabric. The Pickwick Club offered its members social cohesion and a collective resource, but also carried the hope, and, I think, expectation, that the Dickensian world (and at some level of conscious colonization, its institutions) would transfer with them. It was both an expression of nostalgia and of patriotism expressed through the genial, bibulous, funny, kind and triumphantly British world of Pickwick. If, as George Ford has argued, the exceptional success of Pickwick with the broad reading public is linked to a Victorian preference for producing social unity by the "democratic and communal device of shared laughter," then the Pickwick Club of New Zealand might be

seen as a material expression of the same preference transferred to more ambiguous context of colonialism.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the charges levelled against Dickens by contemporary critics about his “low” subjects and “vulgar characters” and in particular that the members of the Pickwick Club spent too much time drinking, are not reflected in the ways the Pickwick Club of New Zealand is described to the readers of the *Gazette*. It was clearly intended to be an antidote to some of the less agreeable aspects of colonial settlement, a reminder of social forms and class solidarity, a manifestation of home away from home. And of course it held its meetings in a pub. Despite the Club’s library and professedly cultural and philanthropic ambitions, it is notable that when the colony celebrated its first anniversary, the keynote event was a horse race won by one of the Pickwick Club members, for the “Pickwick Purse” of 15 guineas.

The phenomenon of the Pickwick Club of New Zealand points not so much to the special aptness of that novel to the colony of New Zealand (though it seems to me to have some), but to the cultural power exercised by Dickens on British readers wherever in the world they were. Part of his power was, as Douglas-Fairhurst has pointed out, the ways in which his fiction spoke for and seemed to embody the times.<sup>27</sup> Were there any circumstances for which a Dickensian character or episode could not be found? When Edward Gibbon Wakefield was writing his treatise *A View of the Art of Colonization*, a text with many unforeseen consequences, he referred to it as “my Mrs Harris,” Sairey Gamp’s much talked about but never seen friend. On Christmas Day, 1900, the Brancepeth clerk wrote in the station diary that the cook had stolen the Christmas beer, and

Like Mr Venus in “Our Mutual Friend” the Head Shepherd and the Station Clerk “floated their powerful minds in tea.”

References to Dickens are everywhere in colonial newspapers. This is not perhaps remarkable, but it does speak forcefully of the role Dickens played in the self-fashioning of British colonies. How to be British and what it meant to be British were questions colonists seemed to find largely answered by Dickens, whose words inhabited not only colonial bookshelves and imaginations, but formed their frame of reference, coloured their speech and shaped their view of how the world outside Britain could be read.

And Dickens was not only in the bookcase. Historical anecdotes suggest a high level of enthusiasm for performative reading and reading aloud. As O. T. Alpers, a colourful lawyer, recorded in his memoir *Cheerful Yesterdays* that on several occasions during the 1860s the newspapers in Napier reported the Judge (Judge Johnson) as giving “Penny Readings” from Dickens and Thackeray, and responding to what the paper called “vociferous encores.”<sup>28</sup> Dickens also found his way on to the physical landscape. Alfred Domett, friend of Browning and of Dickens, was the Provincial Crown Lands Commissioner, and named the streets of Napier after his friends and their literary peers, and the house that Katherine Mansfield’s family moved to in her famous story “Prelude” was called Chesney Wold, the grand but comfortless estate of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*.

Thinking about how reading might have infused social processes and formations, I have been compiling a large database of references to Dickens in New Zealand colonial newspapers, which allows for some speculative remarks. One of the interesting things about compiling the database has been the search terms. “Dickens” tends to bring up syndicated articles about Dickens’s life, his travels, reviews of his performances, his theatrical activities and other biographical data, but searching by the names of Dickens’s characters throws up readers. The connections readers make between events and experiences and Dickensian plots, characters and narratives become a cultural shorthand, part of the historical narrative.

The Australian scholars Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan Martin argue that the works of Dickens play a key role in the transmission of Englishness, and the rather breathless ambition of the Wellington Pickwick Club that Englishmen will relish the works of Boz in a savage land has its loaded inference about cultural dominance.<sup>29</sup> New Zealand's history of Wakefieldian settlement and high proportion of English migrants made the "transmission of Englishness" a different proposition from Australia. As late as 1945, 93.57 per cent of the New Zealand population originated from Great Britain, and the English formed the largest part of that. But Australia's penal colony origins were narratively associated with Dickens's critique of his society, most vividly embodied in the figure of Abel Magwitch, the victimized convict in *Great Expectations*, but also in perceived typological and institutional resemblances. Mirmohamadi and Martin show how Sydney, and The Rocks particularly, was repeatedly represented in contemporary newspapers as a simulacrum of Victorian London's criminal rookeries, and home to versions of Fagin's thieving school. Pressing social concerns about poverty and crime in Sydney threw up many references to *Oliver Twist*, and some visitors from New Zealand were also inclined to align parts of the Australian landscape with Dickens's fictional world. One New Zealand traveller in the 1850s described the

torpid town or village of Liverpool, scarcely reclaimed from the wilderness, and with nothing but bush about it in all directions, frontages to imaginary streets were selling at 50s a foot

and compared it to Dickens's satirical description of Eden, the swamp posing as a settlement, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The same traveller also likened a boarding house in Melbourne with the boarding house for young gentlemen run by the bony and hard-featured Mrs Todgers in the same novel, she of the

row of curls in front of her head, shaped like little barrels of beer; and on the top of it something made of net, — you couldn't call it a cap exactly, — which looked like a black cobweb.<sup>30</sup>

The description of a spider in her web luring young men with barrels of beer is given even more edge if you think of the slang meaning of "todger" as penis. Mrs Todgers's predatory behaviour towards her lodgers is illustrated by the actions of her youngest boarder, Augustus Moddle, who decamps to Van Diemen's Land to escape an unwelcome marriage with the eldest Pecksniff daughter. Australia is narratively present in Dickens in a way that New Zealand is not.

However, the attachment of nineteenth-century New Zealand readers to Dickens, who was transliterated in Maori as Tikena, is illustrated by enormous numbers of references to Dickens in newspapers, memoirs, journals, legal judgements, and political commentary. Love of the works of Dickens enables a vocabulary and lexicon to be shared across distance by people who do not know each other, and provides a kind of metadata, where an allusion to a character or an episode from Dickens, or a distinctive idiolect such as Mrs Gamp's being "disposed" to keep a bottle on the "chimbley" piece, carries with it the detail and consequence of a narrative, without the need to fill in the narrative. These references inflect and nuance commentary on public affairs and personal sentiments.

Mirmohamadi and Martin argue that Dickens had a "valorised role" in the "culture and language transmission that was at the heart of the colonial endeavour," and that the fragility of these processes of transference intensified a sense of cultural precariousness.<sup>31</sup> New Zealand's booming library statistics and the early appearance of the Pickwick Club perhaps indicate some



urgency and anxiety about the transference of culture and pose the question: are references to Dickens and his works evidence of cultural belonging or anxious displacement?

There are two obvious points where colonial unease manifests itself in the New Zealand colony in the nineteenth century. They are not directly to do with the maintenance of cultural identity but the associated and more hardnosed problematics of colonization, namely, first, money; and second, taking over another people and their territory, which resulted most immediately in the wars of the 1860s. Dickensian characters are constantly invoked in commentary on local politics, especially when the subject is public finance. New Zealand had enormous public debt in the nineteenth century, always commented on by British travellers, as it borrowed large amounts to finance the New Zealand Wars and also to build infrastructure. Dickens's descriptions of workhouses, poverty and extravagance supplied character types and domestic scenes that offered pointed reflection on the rocky economics of a small colonial society. The journal of Henry Sewell, New Zealand's first Premier and member of the Canterbury Association which founded the city of Christchurch, often glosses events with references to *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Referring to longstanding tension between the government, accused of reckless spending, and the provinces over public money, Sewell writes of the government:

You will go on in this course of extravagance exhausting our resources, and leaving us in daily peril of Bankruptcy. We will put you upon an allowance. (It is Mad<sup>me</sup>. Mantalini quarrelling with her Husband).<sup>32</sup>

Mr Mantalini is the lecherous gigolo in *Nicholas Nickleby* who relies on the earnings of his significantly older wife to supply his extravagant tastes.

The figure of Sarah (Sairey) Gamp, bibulous and incompetent nurse and midwife, accompanied by her invisible friend Mrs Harris, inflects the documentary history of New Zealand, beginning with Edward Gibbon Wakefield's reference to the manuscript of his treatise *A View of the Art of Colonization*, in which he set out his highly destructive theory of systematic colonization, as "My Mrs Harris."<sup>33</sup> Mrs Gamp was called on across the colony to illustrate a range of social problems, including health, and like other Dickensian characters such as Wackford Squeers, the cruel headmaster of Dotheboys School in *Nicholas Nickleby*, her power was such that she contaminated a whole profession.

The *Nelson Examiner* resorts to Sairey Gamp to characterize the role of the Provincial Council as nursemaid to the colony:

We have no doubt that our Provincial Council—the good nurse that "monthlies" (if indeed its usual one month is not to be extended to three this time) our travelling community; nay, acts as wet-nurse to every nascent need of the public, every sucking civic scheme and project—we have no doubt, we say, that so experienced a Mrs. Gamp will take this bantling too in hand, and succeed in silencing for the present its plaintive cries with a proper allowance of pap from the Estimates, or a few drops of the Daffy's Elixir of Dr. Monro's Resolutions.<sup>34</sup>

In an article titled "Our Pah," a contributor to the Wellington *Independent* satirises a visit to a pa in 1862. It is not clear which pa this is, but it sounds like Whanganui, and in what claims to be humour but is now offensively racist, the pa and its inhabitants are described in a mock ethnographic travelogue. Mrs Gamp is part of the comic and literary frame of reference that depicts Māori and their living conditions as backward and primitive. As a point of reference, she reinforces the suggestion that they bring their health problems on themselves.

To get out of the tainted atmosphere occasioned by the old lady's cookery, we will look at another sort of house called a whare-puni- This house you see has no walls at all, but is little more than a long trench with a roof thrown over it. These wretched dwellings are the hot-beds of one-half the evils, cutaneous and asthmatical, that more particularly affect Maories. In these horrid places they sleep huddled up together with a roaring fire, and sweltering in their own steam, they will when they awake half stiffened rush out naked or nearly so, and squat outside on the damp ground, and consequently though they do not meet with the fate of the immortal Mrs. Gamp's progeny, who had "door steps settled on their lungs" they lay the seeds of all those evils, that end in consumption or confirmed asthma.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs Gamp is metaphorically connected to many puling bantlings and stillbirths—from Provincial Council ordinances to shifts in the colonial Cabinet. When there was talk of J. C. Richmond entering Cabinet as a "general utility man" in 1881, the *Taranaki Herald* editorial said that having tried to "smother the public works policy in its cradle" it would be too bad if, in the character of a "political Mrs Gamp" he should be called in to "facilitate its exit from a world of trouble."<sup>36</sup> The Premier Julius Vogel, attacked for his weak financial policy, was referred to as the "Mrs Gamp of finance" by the Wellington *Independent* in 1869, and the *Otago Daily Times*, referring to another well-known and often recycled facet of Mrs Gamp's behaviour, noted that Donald McLean, coming into the Native Ministry accusing his predecessors of wasting money, had a "position with regard to money ... like that of Mrs Gamp with the bottle, it was to be placed 'on the chimbley,' that he might 'put his lips to it when so disposed."<sup>37</sup>

Mrs Gamp was also useful to lampoon or buttress political opinion, particularly in relation to George Grey, who had a very mixed reputation. A group of Māori prisoners of war were taken to a prison hulk in Auckland Harbour in 1864. They were captured after the battle of Rangiriri in November 1863, a defeat for the Maori Kingitanga movement which was trying to resist the invasion of the Waikato. According to James Belich, the defeat was enabled by General Cameron's misuse of a white flag.<sup>38</sup> About 200 prisoners were held on the hulk, then transferred to Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf which was the home of the Governor, George Grey. The entire party escaped and eventually made their way back to their homes in the Waikato but some newspaper reports claimed some of the prisoners expressed regret at having left their comfortable quarters at Kawau and said they wanted to return.

The *Wellington Independent*, in 1864, featured a satirical letter from Mrs Gamp to Mrs Harris attacking the "nasty papers" and defending George Grey who was partly blamed for the escape. "Mrs Gamp" presents the escape as a comedy of manners, in which nice George Grey gave the prisoners pleasant gardening work, fed them tremendously and let them go when they'd had enough of it, when he could have sent them, as others had suggested, to the Aborigines Protection Society which would have looked after them like a mother and saved money. The use of the notoriously unreliable Mrs Gamp to voice praise for Grey's relationships with Maori allows for ironic critical play with Grey's motives and behaviour. As Mrs Gamp's nursling ("knowed ever sin he were in long clothes"), everything becomes politically questionable, including her praise of his "kind art [heart]" to Maori, though Grey did on the whole have sympathetic attitudes to Maori. His role in the escape has never been clarified but was certainly the occasion of political manoeuvring.

Mrs Gamp is extraordinarily portable as a figure of cultural and critical resonance. She is applied to the law, or rather to dodgy lawyers, illustrating "how suddenly knowledge is

acquired in this colony. I presume this precocity is an exemplification of Mrs. Gamp's management of her pap; and we poor settlers must take the consequence"; and to a proposal that British governmental uniforms should be introduced to New Zealand: "we have no doubt that among the pattern costumes delineated in Lord Carnarvon's drawings, we shall find specimens of Mrs. Gamp's mob-cap, patterns, and bottle." But she is only one of the Dickensian characters whose templates are found throughout colonial life.

And it is not only among British settlers that Dickens provides acculturating context. *The Maori Messenger*, a government produced Maori language newspaper, ran excerpts from *Household Words*, and there is some evidence of Maori readers of Dickens.<sup>39</sup> Rates of literacy were high among Maori in the nineteenth century and the transliteration of Dickens's name suggests a degree of currency. A reference to his work occurs in the autobiography of Reweti Kohere, well known clergyman and later writer and editor of the Anglican paper *Te Pipiwharauoa*. Born in 1871 and living on the East Coast, Kohere described his childhood home as a small cottage, where three families lived.

Our bed was separated from the rest of the household by means of a tent-fly. Since this house was built with timber from a wreck, it might truly be said of us, as was said of the Peggotty family in Dickens's story, that we lived in a wreck.<sup>40</sup> (102)

It would be naïve to think that the community of Dickens readers was unproblematically connected by a shared affection for his works to Englishness and to colonialism. As Pascale Casanova has said, in order to achieve literary existence, writers have to create the conditions under which they can be seen.<sup>41</sup> Dickens's exceptional visibility speaks both to the conditions he created—by which I mean his narrative innovation and publishing methods—and to the ways in which his narratives inhabited the minds and hearts of his readers, even those whose familiarity with him was the result of subjugation to an alien culture. The ways in which readers read, remembered and used characters and narratives from Dickens displays the many mixed motives and multiple dimensions of narrative references. His presence in colonial life makes it possible to see how a collective imaginary can be an interpretive tool, a source of comfort, a critical mechanism and an imperial grand narrative, bridging metropolitan and provincial cultures, racial and cultural difference, public concerns and the private reading self who knows that in the minds of other readers the same colourful and pathetic characters are lodged and their language will need no explanation. Here is Mrs Gamp with her bottle on the fireplace.

I am going to finish with Mrs Gamp proposing a toast. Partly to signal that it is time to conclude, but also because the field in which Sairey Gamp is drinking with Betsey Prig is, in some sense, the field I find myself crossing. Churned by the passing of many feet, I look with love and tenderness for traces and echoes of readers, always hoping to see what they had in their heads as they engaged in making other kinds of history and to make history out of that.

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## Notes

This article is the text of the W. H. Oliver lecture for 2017. Parts of it were previously published as “Dickens in New Zealand,” *Literature Compass* (1 May 2014), [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.12146/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.12146/abstract)

And

“Reading Dickens,” *Australian Literary Studies* (1 October 2014).  
[www.australianliterarystudies.com.au/articles/reading-dickens](http://www.australianliterarystudies.com.au/articles/reading-dickens)

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (London: Harrap, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> J. E. Traue, “The Public Library Explosion in Colonial New Zealand,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 42, No. 2 (2007): 151–64.

<sup>5</sup> Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, “Introduction: A Land Mild and Bold, Diffident and Pertinent,” New Zealand Electronic Text Centre, [nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/teiStaIntr.html](http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/teiStaIntr.html) paragraph 1.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 67.

<sup>13</sup> Jessie Mackay, “The Charge of Parihaka,” in *The Spirit of the Rangitira and other Ballads* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1889), 30–32. Cited in Stafford and Williams, *Maoriland*.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 4.

<sup>15</sup> George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* (New York: Cordan Press, 1974), 53. First edition circa 1955.

<sup>16</sup> J. S. Ryan, *Charles Dickens and New Zealand: A Colonial Image*, selected from the periodical publications of Charles Dickens, with historical and biographical notes by A. H. Reed (Wellington: Reed for Dunedin Public Library, 1965), 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>18</sup> *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, volume 1, issue 6 (16 May, 1840), 3. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)

<sup>19</sup> Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> William Colenso, *Ancient Tide-lore and Tales of the Sea from Two Ends of the World* (Napier: R. C. Harding, 1889), 40, note c. Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1816).

<sup>21</sup> J. R. Jackson, *What to Observe; or The Traveller’s Remembrancer* (London: J. Madden and Co., 1841).

<sup>22</sup> *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, volume 1, issue 7 (23 May, 1840), 1. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)

<sup>23</sup> *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, volume 1, issue 20 (22 August, 1840), 3. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 205–06.

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- <sup>25</sup> *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, volume 1, issue 20 (22 August, 1840), 3. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>26</sup> Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens*.
- <sup>28</sup> O. T. J. Alpers, *Cheerful Yesterdays* (London: John Murray, 1928), 185.
- <sup>29</sup> Kylie Mirmohamadi, and Susan K. Martin, *Colonial Dickens* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012).
- <sup>30</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1844), 95.
- <sup>31</sup> Mirmohamadi and Martin, *Colonial Dickens*.
- <sup>32</sup> Henry Sewell, *The Journal of Henry Sewell 1853–7*, ed. David Macintyre (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1980), 174–75, entry for 16 September, 1855.
- <sup>33</sup> E. G. Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1849).
- <sup>34</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, volume 17, no. 18 (30 May, 1857), 1. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>35</sup> “Our Pah,” *Independent*, volume 17, issue 1765 (11 September, 1862). 4. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>36</sup> *Taranaki Herald*, volume 29, issue 3745 (28 May, 1881). Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>37</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, issue 3201 (10 May, 1872). Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>38</sup> James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland: Penguin, 1986).
- <sup>39</sup> *The Maori Messenger*, volume 2, no. 52 (19 December, 1850), 4. Accessed through Papers Past, [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)
- <sup>40</sup> Reweti Kohere, *The autobiography of a Maori* (Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1951), 102.
- <sup>41</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 177.