

Settled: *Dorrit* Down Under

JASON R. RUDY

LITTLE *Dorrit* is not a novel about Australia. Charles Dickens's circuitous narrative of 1855–57 avoids an antipodean excursion; its primary geospatial force is centripetal, drawing protagonists back toward London from Asia and continental Europe, ultimately foreclosing settlement abroad. This narrative resolution is neither surprising nor atypical of mid-century British novels, few of which imagine Australia as a suitable narrative endpoint, especially for middle-class characters. According to Simon During, “literary subjectivity failed to blossom in the new colonies” as a result of “the intensification of the cultural power of Englishness itself”: a mid-century “vigorous commitment to Englishness by literary intellectuals.”¹ While During's claim has more bearing on novels than poetry, where a sense of Australian

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¹ Simon During, “Out of England: Literary Subjectivity in the Australian Colonies, 1788–1867,” in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, ed. Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), p. 13. My thanks to Jonathan Grossman and Helena Michie for inviting me to write this essay, and to Jonathan for so thoughtfully provoking my revisions. I would also like to express my gratitude to the attendees at the 2018 Dickens Universe at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for their engagement with this work, and to Tanya Agathocleous, my first and most trusted reader.

selfhood gradually took root, his insight helps make sense not only of *Little Dorrit's* London-bound resolution but also that of any number of other Victorian novels that fail to muster sufficient energy to break free of English confines.²

Little Dorrit, then, is not a novel about Australia, and this might have been all that was worth saying on the topic were it not for a set of historical and biographical frames that resituate the novel in compelling relation to the southern hemisphere. The pathways through *Little Dorrit* highlight a foundational nineteenth-century relation between class and mobility: the challenge of imagining middle-class emigration abroad and the failure of middle-class Britons to imagine the colonies with any significant detail. For Dickens's predominantly bourgeois readers, as for Dickens himself, Australia ultimately was an abstraction and not a realistic destination, even if the idea of emigrating there was occasionally tempting. The reluctance to think meaningfully about Australia in *Little Dorrit* is of a piece with the Victorian novel *tout court*, a genre that largely mirrors the aspirations and sentiments of its domestic readers, few of whom would have contemplated life abroad.³ Bernard Porter notes that nineteenth-century British immigration was only nominally "voluntary," given that most who left "were effectively forced to, usually to escape abject poverty." What enthusiasm there was for emigration, according to Porter, largely reflected a middle-class desire "for working-class emigration . . . [as] a ploy to defuse dangerous protest."⁴ Crucially, then, when the newly married Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit descend into London at the conclusion of Dickens's novel, they do so after

² On the emergence of poetic subjectivity in Victorian Australia, see Jason R. Rudy, *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2017). On English novels that engage meaningfully with Australia and New Zealand, see for example Helen Lucy Blythe, *The Victorian Colonial Romance with the Antipodes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jude Piesse, *British Settler Emigration in Print, 1832–1877* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016); and *Domestic Fiction in Colonial Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Tamara S. Wagner (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014).

³ See for example Franco Moretti's claim that "the novel functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state" (Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* [London and New York: Verso, 1998], p. 20).

⁴ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), p. 27.

having secured their middle-class status. Such a comfortable bourgeois dénouement is significant, given that *Little Dorrit* is among Dickens's more autobiographical novels, reflecting the experiences of his father in a debtors' prison (and his family's accompanying economic precarity) in the same period, the mid-1820s, in which the novel is set.

What follows is a reading of *Little Dorrit* that accounts for antipodean narratives not taken, both in the real lives of the Dickens family and in the fictional lives of Dickens's characters. I attend to the biographical, then the fictional, to support two operating claims: first, that the novel's resolution points to the ultimate impossibility for Dickens and most of his middle-class readers to envisage meaningful life in Australia; and second, that the lack of movement outward in *Little Dorrit*—its non-narration of Australia—solidifies the novel's bourgeois status only after flirting with other possibilities. In so doing, Dickens's novel upholds Isobel Armstrong's claim that nineteenth-century novels appear more conservative than they actually were due to "the formal habit of reading politics off from the endings of novels, assuming that the resolutions and closures of fiction condense the total meaning of the text."⁵ The conclusion to *Little Dorrit* reflects a broader phenomenon that kept settler-colonialism offstage for the mid-century British novel because the constitution of a *domestic* bourgeois sphere depended instead on the departure of lower-class emigrants for colonial spaces abroad. But *Little Dorrit*'s domestic resolution should not forestall a reading of more radical possibilities imagined over the course of its many pages.



Consider as a counterfactual narrative what might have happened had Dickens's father been transported to New South Wales rather than imprisoned in the Marshalsea from February to May 1824. John Dickens was arrested for the bourgeois crime of debt, owing the sum of forty pounds to

⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), p. 49.

a baker by the name of James Karr. Had John Dickens been less privileged and instead stooped to thievery (had he stolen some bread from the baker rather than finding himself indebted to him), he and his family may have been strong candidates for transportation to Sydney's penal colony. Instead, in a turn of events well known to literary history, twelve-year-old Charles Dickens was separated from his parents and compelled to work long days in a blacking factory. He slept in accommodations of his own near the prison, and the memory of this trauma remained vivid to him throughout his adult life. "Imprisonment was with him everywhere," writes Peter Ackroyd, as was the anxiety of seeing his genteel father brought low, "perilously hovering between classes."⁶

Nearly thirty-three thousand British convicts were transported to Australia between 1821 and 1830, the period in which *Little Dorrit* is set, and the numbers were on the rise through the decade; transportation peaked in 1833, then declined until 1840, when it was ended in New South Wales.⁷ According to the historian Robert Hughes, "about four-fifths of all transportation was for 'offences against property'" because transportation targeted individuals seen as a threat to Britain's growing middle classes (*The Fatal Shore*, p. 163). Thomas Keneally traces a rise in English urban crime to the Enclosure Acts, which from the 1760s into the early nineteenth century pushed "small farmers and agricultural workers off land their families had worked for centuries," leaving them in states of economic precarity.⁸ "The final aim of the transportation system, then," writes Hughes, "was less to punish individual crimes than to uproot an enemy class from the British social fabric" (*The Fatal Shore*, p. 168). Thieves, counterfeiterers, and other agents of fraud were all threats to the class of British citizens that transportation was devised to protect. As a commonplace debtor, John Dickens did not qualify.

The early decades of Australian transportation were understood by the British at home to be only slightly preferable to

⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 74, 77.

⁷ See Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 161–62.

⁸ Thomas Keneally, *Australians: Origins to Eureka* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin, 2009), p. 47.

capital punishment. Grace Karskens notes that at the turn of the nineteenth century “the connection between transportation and slavery was firm in the minds of the English public.”⁹ By the 1850s, however, when Dickens was writing *Little Dorrit*, the popular perception of Australia had shifted toward a more charitable view, largely owing to the curtailing of transportation and the rise of free emigration. According to an 1852 article in *Household Words* (an article that Charles Dickens himself likely would have edited), by the 1820s life in colonial Sydney was surprisingly agreeable. This was the period when free settlers began arriving in the colony, “anxious to share the benefits of the thieves.” Cattle were imported for breeding, and “stock-owners were constantly discovering new tracts of pasture land.”¹⁰ The availability of land was key, as was the perspective of the colonial government that this land was free for the taking; that Indigenous peoples had been living there for tens of thousands of years was infrequently acknowledged, and rarely curtailed the aspirations of settler colonialism.¹¹

Had John Dickens been transported, he likely would have labored on behalf of the colonial government for a period of seven years, the standard sentence, after which he would have become a freedman with the opportunity to own land. In the 1820s, a plot of forty acres could be had in New South Wales for a small administrative fee. Karskens writes that “prisoners who became settlers, who made families, and built houses which were clearly homes . . . could [no longer] be treated as prisoners” (*The Colony*, p. 183). Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005) follows this narrative arc, concluding with the onetime convict William Thornhill, a fictional character modeled on the real-life Solomon Wiseman, looking out proudly over his plantation, a wealthy man; it was a narrative that many convicts would have had in mind once they arrived in the penal colony.¹² Not incidentally, Grenville’s narrative is

⁹ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin, 2009), p. 93.

¹⁰ [Anon.], “Three Colonial Epochs,” *Household Words*, 4 (1852), 435.

¹¹ See for example Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010).

¹² See Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Co., 2005).

also a version of Magwitch's story: "I've been a sheep-farmer," he tells Pip, "[a] stock-breeder, other trades besides, away in the new world."¹³

To be clear: some convicts suffered greatly as part of the transportation system. But the greatest suffering befell those who committed crimes after having been transported, because they would have been sent from Sydney to the far more punishing settlements at Tasmania or Norfolk Island. Those who played by the rules and avoided running afoul of the system had a far better chance of upward mobility than did the London poor. *Household Words* notes that "every prisoner knew that, if well conducted, he would obtain his liberty, a grant of land, and, perhaps, in the end, become a magistrate, and dine with the Governor!" ("Three Colonial Epochs," p. 435). Though an exaggeration of Australian fecundity, Dickens's journal reflects the popular mid-century narrative of Australian transportation and upward mobility. For one as attuned to irony as Dickens, the topsy-turvy nature of 1820s Australian transportation would have been readily apparent. Commit a crime resulting in transportation and one might in short time become a landowner in a flourishing colonial state; but fail to pay an English debtor and the result instead was to wallow in prison, one's family separated and struggling in the bleak dankness of early-nineteenth-century London.

And yet, the narrative of transportation did not manifest for either John Dickens or William Dorrit. *Little Dorrit* the novel is distinctly *not* a tale of Australia. To write about Australia in relation to the novel, then, engages in a mode of counterfactual imagining. Insofar as *Little Dorrit* is not historical fiction, and does not wish to rewrite established history, my methodology differs from Catherine Gallagher's *Telling It Like It Wasn't* (2018), which examines novels that envision alternative historical scenarios (what if the Confederacy had won the Civil War, for example).¹⁴ Neither is my method here an exercise in what Gerald Prince calls *disnarration* ("all the events that *do not*

¹³ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 315.

¹⁴ See Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018).

happen but [that], nonetheless, are referred to . . . by the narrative text”), nor what Robyn Warhol calls *unnarration* (narrators “saying they cannot or will not tell what happened”).¹⁵ Australia is simply not narrated, because it is not significant in any way to the story of William Dorrit and his family; it remains absent and almost entirely unreferenced throughout Dickens’s long novel.

Australia nonetheless hovers in the peripheries of *Little Dorrit*, as it may have hovered in the peripheries of Dickens’s own familial history. Dickens himself considered emigrating to Australia early in the process of writing *Little Dorrit*, seeing in the new colony a place where he might have escaped from the pressures of an increasingly complicated life. In “imagining . . . other uses of history,” to use Rae Greiner’s phrase, I detail in this essay what *Little Dorrit* offers readers *in place of* Australian emigration.¹⁶ Specifically, in not being a novel about Australia and Australian emigration, *Little Dorrit* engages in an imaginative working-through of why ultimately it might have been better to remain at home: why Dickens and his bourgeois readers in possession of the resources to emigrate instead opted not to.



Little Dorrit falls chronologically between Dickens’s two most obvious fictional excursions to Australia: the Micawbers’ emigration in *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and the Magwitch narrative of *Great Expectations* (1860–61). But Australia loomed large in Dickens’s imagination in the 1850s, even as his novel writing in that decade did not explicitly engage with that part of the world. Dickens’s friend and

¹⁵ Gerald Prince, “The Disnarrated,” *Style*, 22 (1988), 2; Robyn R. Warhol, “Narrative Refusals and Generic Transformation in Austen and James: What Doesn’t Happen in *Northanger Abbey* and *The Spoils of Poynton*,” *Henry James Review*, 28 (2007), 259.

¹⁶ Rae Greiner, “Feeling Like It Wasn’t,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47 (2019), 102. Also important is Andrew Miller’s account of the optative mode in realist fiction, and specifically in Dickens’s novels: “To the extent that realism proposes to give us stories about how things really were, a space naturally opens up within that mode to tell us how things might have been, but were not” (Miller, “Lives Unled in Realist Fiction,” *Representations*, 98 [2007], 122).

fellow author Richard H. Horne left London for Melbourne in 1852. A so-called “Australian madness” had struck London in April of that year following the arrival in the capital of ships, one after another, weighed down with “tons of gold.”¹⁷ Dickens hired Horne to write essays on Australia for *Household Words*. At roughly this point in time, Australia shifts in the British imagination from a place primarily for convicts to an opportunity for wealth and upward mobility, though Horne’s own accounting of Melbourne may have given readers pause (by the 1850s Sydney was a well-established city; Melbourne had been established only in 1835). In an 1853 *Household Words* essay, Horne describes a “canvass town” of tents outside Melbourne where new emigrants reside in dire conditions. “Young gentlemen of family and education drive water-carts about the ‘streets,’ and sell wood (felled, and brought from a mile or two off in the bush),” he writes, drawing attention to the apparent loss of class stature in the new colony: “how many University men does this strange collection of tents . . . contain?”¹⁸ He concludes, “we have landed on the most inhospitable shore on the face of the civilised globe” (Horne, “Canvass Town,” p. 367). Though to some extent Australia had become an appealing destination for free emigration, middle-class Britons would have rightly hesitated to risk their stature for an uncertain future abroad.

Given that loss of economic stability prompts the Micawbers’ emigration in *David Copperfield* (“Mr Micawber’s difficulties,” Mrs. Micawber calls them),¹⁹ and given the parallel narratives of imprisonment for Wilkins Micawber and William Dorrit in debtors’ prisons, readers of *Little Dorrit*’s early issues may have wondered whether the Dorrit family, too, would eventually find itself resettling abroad. Mrs. Micawber imagines Australia as a place for upward mobility, where a man such as her husband would find “a reasonable opening for his talents to develop themselves” (Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 653).

¹⁷ Ann Blainey, *The Farthing Poet: A Biography of Richard Hengist Horne, 1802–84: A Lesser Literary Lion* (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 190.

¹⁸ [Richard H. Horne], “Canvass Town,” *Household Words*, 7 (1853), 364.

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 136.

Indeed, over the course of *David Copperfield*, Micawber ascends from debtor in a London prison to magistrate in an Australian town, a narrative arc that reflects Britain's topsy-turvy perception of its antipodean colonies. *The Leisure Hour* characterizes Australia as "a land of *contrarities*," a world "turned upside down" where "swans are black; eagles, white."²⁰ The Micawbers' rags-to-riches narrative fits within this upside-down frame.²¹ Though Dickens chose neither to emigrate nor even to visit the southern hemisphere, Australia functions for him as Paul Giles suggests it did for generations of American authors, "as a heightened version of comparative consciousness, within which the phenomenological selfhood of any given culture is refracted through alternative perspectives."²² In his novels, Dickens imagines this alternate perspective through both the prism of class and the opportunities afforded or foreclosed by Australian emigration.

Emigration emerged as a real-life possibility for Dickens in the months shortly after *Little Dorrit* began its serialization. John Forster, Dickens's first biographer, explains:

Early in 1856 (20th of January) the notion revisited [Dickens] of writing a book in solitude. . . . He was at this date in Paris; and during the visit to him of [William] Macready in the following April, the self-revelations were resumed. The great actor was then living in retirement at Sherborne, to which he had gone on quitting the stage; and Dickens gave favourable report of his enjoyment of the change to his little holiday at Paris. Then, after recurring to his own old notion of having some slight idea of going to settle in Australia, only he could not do it until he should have finished *Little Dorrit*, he went on

²⁰ [Anon.], "Australia. I.—Its General Features and Resources," *Leisure Hour*, 31 (1852), 498, 499.

²¹ Elaine Freedgood notes that Dickens's "correspondence chronicles the history of [his] long (in)decision" about whether or not to go (Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006], p. 81). In 1862, when Dickens was contemplating a lecture tour to Australia, he thought of writing an account entitled "The Uncommercial Traveller Upside Down" (see Coral Lansbury, "Dickens, Charles [1812–1870]," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, ed. Douglas Pike, et al, 18 vols. [Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1972], IV, 71).

²² Paul Giles, *Antipodean America: Australasia and the Constitution of U.S. Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 24.

to say that perhaps Macready, if he could get into harness again, would not be the worse for some such troubles as were worrying himself.²³

Forster's syntax pushes the notion of Dickens's emigration into a subordinate clause: the main idea of his sentence has to do with the actor Macready, not Dickens. But the point remains: Dickens was drawn to emigrating, both for the appeal of its distance from public life and for its promise of adventure. In an April 1856 letter to Forster in which he contemplates Australia, Dickens writes:

However strange it is to be never at rest, and never satisfied, and ever trying after something that is never reached, and to be always laden with plot and plan and care and worry, how clear it is that it must be, and that one is driven by an [irresistible] might until the journey is worked out! It is much better to go on and fret, than to stop and fret. As to repose—for some men there's no such thing in this life.²⁴

These sentences seem not just an accounting of Dickens's own antipathy to stasis, but a reasonable gloss of the novel *Little Dorrit*, whose narrative restlessness constantly exhibits a concern for "plot and plan and care and worry"—"until the journey is worked out!" Richard Horne's dire picture of Melbourne aside, Australia presented Dickens with an escape from life as he knew it.

The chapters of *Little Dorrit* serialized immediately after this letter to Forster suggest that Australia remained on the author's mind. This would have been the sixth installment, released 1 May 1856, chapters 19 to 22 of Book I. Just prior to these pages we find Amy Dorrit on Southwark Bridge, from which she may have observed passenger ships, "looking at the water" and "absorbed in thought."²⁵ Shortly after, William Dorrit in the Marshalsea imagines himself "like a passenger aboard

²³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), II, 243.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, letter to John Forster, [13 April 1856], quoted in Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, II, 244.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 210. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

ship in a long voyage, who has recovered from sea-sickness, and is impatient of that weakness in the fresher passengers taken aboard at the last port" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 218). Dickens then connects Amy conceptually to "the ways of gold mines," a near-explicit reference to Australia; she knows nothing of them, we are told (p. 226). And, more poignantly, we see Amy imagining landscapes beyond the city to which she is confined—landscapes that read like the essays describing Australia to potential émigrés:

She thought of the sunrise on rolling rivers, of the sunrise on wide seas, of the sunrise on rich landscapes, of the sunrise on great forests where the birds were waking and the trees were rustling; and she looked down into the living grave on which the sun had risen, with her father in it, three and twenty years, and said, in a burst of sorrow and compassion, "No, no, I have never seen him in my life!" (p. 225)

Amy Dorrit's imagination here casts the confinement of London against the freedom of a place elsewhere, perhaps a settler colony. This possibility works both in the present moment of Dickens's publication (the later 1850s) and the present of *Little Dorrit* the novel (the 1820s). In Dickens's present, the confinement may have represented the author's own sense of stasis, the result of obligations both professional and personal: his writing and publishing career, his large family, and his mistress.²⁶ Australia conceivably would have offered an escape from those obligations. Dickens's friend Horne had left London not just to pursue gold, but to flee from an unhappy marriage.

In the 1820s, transportation would have been an alternative to the stasis and confinement of imprisonment. The transportation system was designed to train men into becoming colonial subjects rather than long-term prisoners. Whereas William Dorrit's period of incarceration is necessarily *static* (nothing changes for the imprisoned men), transported prisoners were meant to develop into better versions of themselves. Indeed, what was at stake in the later years of the transportation

²⁶ Peter Ackroyd describes 1856 as "a year of restlessness" for Dickens and notes that "there was something wrong, something troubling him"; "Dickens was feeling strangely unwell" (*Dickens*, pp. 756, 774).

system was a theory of rehabilitation that was also a theory of character development. Consider the scene that Clennam observes early in the novel while staying overnight at the Marshalsea. Far from changing, or becoming better versions of themselves, the men confined there “had come to regard insolvency as the normal state of mankind” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 84). They are, in other words, fixed in the same state that first landed them in the debtors’ prison. No hope for transformation attends their indefinite sentences: they are proscribed equally from the world without and from economic security.

Character *development*, in contrast, would rewrite the narrative of stasis among imprisoned debtors, opening future paths to bourgeois stability. The potential narrative path from incarceration to improved behavior (and eventually to improved future prospects) comes into clearer focus, as Philip Steer shows, if we consider Dickens’s affinity for the penal administrator Alexander Maconochie, author of a book about character development among prisoners.²⁷ The 1846 volume *Crime and Punishment. The Mark System, Framed to Mix Persuasion with Punishment, and Make Their Effect Improving, Yet Their Operation Severe* lays out a method for rehabilitating criminal behavior. The “mark system” of the title held that “in lieu of sentences to imprisonment or transportation, measured . . . by months or years, . . . sentences [would instead correlate] to an amount of labour, measured by a given number of marks”; the prisoner would thus be released sooner depending on his “zeal, industry, and effectiveness of . . . labour in the works allotted to him.”²⁸ A prisoner’s character, and his ability to improve that character, would therefore have a direct effect on the duration of his sentence.

Dickens’s efforts in relation to Urania Cottage, a home in London for fallen women that he helped establish in the late 1840s, demonstrates his indebtedness to Maconochie’s system. The idea behind Urania Cottage was to send reformed

²⁷ See Philip Steer, *Settler Colonialism in Victorian Literature: Economics and Political Identity in the Networks of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020), pp. 61–66.

²⁸ [Alexander] Maconochie, *Crime and Punishment. The Mark System, Framed to Mix Persuasion with Punishment, and Make Their Effect Improving, Yet Their Operation Severe* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1846), pp. 50–51.

women—women rehabilitated through the mark system—to Australia, where they would be “fit wives” for the men there. “Emigration,” wrote Dickens, “is an essential part of our compact.”²⁹ Though transportation rarely followed Maconchie’s ideals, and the realities in Australia were far different than what Dickens likely imagined, nonetheless in the decade leading up to *Little Dorrit* Dickens associated relocation to Australia with character development—an improvement to character—tied to future economic stability. Steer shows that from *David Copperfield* onward, Dickens “attests to a new ability to imagine British identity at the furthest reaches of the empire,” such that British people could go on being British—and even more, better versions of their British selves (*Settler Colonialism*, p. 61). This is also the argument, more broadly construed, of the historian James Belich’s *Replenishing the Earth* (2009), which suggests that the boom of nineteenth-century free emigration was facilitated by the re-creation of British culture in colonial spaces, or at least *the idea* of that re-creation (Belich calls this “the cloning system”).³⁰ Australia thus serves as an imaginative counterexample to the Marshalsea’s fixation of character, its resistance to individual betterment, and its foreclosing of upward mobility.

When Dickens considered emigrating to Australia in 1856, he may well have seen it as a place where he too would continue developing. Perhaps Australia’s topsy-turvydom would enliven his writing, and would give him opportunities for personal development as well. Emigration is not travel—it is neither wandering nor the aimless existence of the Dorrits in Italy. Emigration is purposeful and directed: key qualities lacking in the Dorrit family, Amy aside. “To have no work to do was strange”—this is the omniscient narrator describing Amy on the road to Italy—“but not half so strange as having glided into a corner where she had no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive, no cares of others to load herself with”; “the more surprising the scenes [through which she traveled], the more

²⁹ Charles Dickens, letter to W. J. Broderip, 26 July 1850, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeleine House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), VI, 136.

³⁰ See James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 165–69.

they resembled the unreality of her own inner life as she went through its vacant places all day long" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 451). A counterfactual narrative of emigration would fill Amy's vacancy with purpose and futurity (qualities sorely absent from most of *Little Dorrit*), reflecting a moment in Dickens's own life when remaining home may have seemed (in a hyperbolic register) the equivalent of a prison sentence, and travel elsewhere lacked a concrete and meaningful endpoint.

These different versions of hypothetical mobility point to deep ambivalences around settler colonialism for Dickens and his domestic readers. Depending on which narrative one read, Australia was either a space of working-class upward mobility (Micawber) or middle-class debasement (Horne). The messiness of viewpoints is symptomatic of the time, when public perceptions of Australia, settler colonialism, and the empire more generally were deeply mixed, and increasingly pessimistic. *Little Dorrit* would finish its serialization in June 1857, one month after the start of the Indian rebellion that permanently reshaped Britain's relation to its colonies. Antoinette Burton has shown, however, that even before that momentous turn, British commentators questioned the empire's "financial viability" as well as whether "imperial ambition could, or should, define national greatness."³¹ *Little Dorrit's* centripetal narrative force—its calling back of characters to London after a series of forays abroad—thus aligns with the emerging colonial skepticism of its time. Dickens idealizes working-class emigration as narratives of upward mobility, exemplified in both the fictional Micawbers and the real-life women of Urania Cottage. But these outwardly bound narratives ultimately offer little to bourgeois Britons, Dickens himself included.



At the start of *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam has spent decades abroad, and his connection to Britain is ambivalent. According to Amanda Anderson, Clennam has

³¹ Antoinette Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), p. 259.

an “alienated relation to his homeland.”³² This alienation comes about in part through a process very much like that of Australian transportation, a connection Dickens makes nearly explicit. Consider the language Clennam uses to describe his childhood removal to China, a moment that is also our first encounter with his character: “Trained by main force; broken, not bent; *heavily ironed* with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; *shipped away* to the other end of the world before I was of age, and *exiled there* until my father’s death there, a year ago” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 20; emphases added). Clennam’s heavy ironing, his shipping away, and his exile marshal the same language one would have used to describe the experiences of a transported convict. For example, in Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), the best-known novel about convict transportation, “forty heavily-ironed men” work to build roads in Hobart; the convicts eagerly anticipate “news of how the world, from which they were exiled, was progressing.”³³ Dickens draws out the parallel to transportation just a few lines above Clennam’s backstory with reference to the voyage that first brought Australia to European attention in the late 1700s: “Tattycoram,” Mr. Meagles asserts, “will be a greater traveller in course of time than Captain Cook” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 195).

As the novel gets under way, Clennam has been liberated from his exile, but he remains “a waif” who might “stray everywhere . . . liable to be drifted where any current may set” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 195). This is the language of dislocation (or “detachment,” in Anderson’s terms) that *Little Dorrit* so demonstrably critiques, in part through the character of Miss Wade, who exists (again in Anderson’s terms) “in permanent exile, always wandering, never truly dwelling,” but also through Amy Dorrit, who experiences in Italy the strangeness of having no work to do, no purpose in her daily existence (*The Powers of Distance*, p. 81). Exile, home, and belonging are key terms that scholars of this novel have addressed in some detail, and they

³² Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), p. 85.

³³ Marcus Clarke, *His Natural Life* (1874; originally titled *For the Term of His Natural Life*), ed. Lurline Stuart (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 2001), pp. 286, 120.

come into a new focus through the idea of Australia. James Buzard has argued that “home” and “world” are for the novel a “false dichotomy,” and that *Little Dorrit* shows the ways the local, the national, and the cosmopolitan might all coexist as part of an interdependent “ecology.”³⁴ The novel provokes us to ask how we might belong within communities and yet not belong with such intensity that we lose the ability to sympathize with other ways of being. How might we be free to wander but not so free that we lose a sense of where we are, and where home might be?

Given the novel’s dynamic of imagined migration, the verb “to settle” takes on particular force, reflecting *Little Dorrit*’s pervasive ambivalence about mobility and belonging, as well as its meditation on the relationship between self-knowledge and character. Flora alone among Dickens’s many characters associates the word with the establishment of a home, as in “to settle down” domestically. She suggests that Clennam must have been “desirous to settle” in China, which to her mind would have included marrying “some Chinese lady” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 144). Later she explains to Amy how she and Mr. F “returned to . . . London” from the Continent “and settled down” (p. 278). Among a range of other meanings for *to settle* as a verb, including to calm oneself (settle down), to bestow an inheritance (settle on), to resolve a financial agreement (settle a bill), and to lower (as a house might settle in its foundations), *Little Dorrit* most often highlights the word in relation to personal resolve: Mrs. Flintwinch, for example, is “settled” in her expression as she faces Rigaud toward the novel’s end (p. 749), and Clennam has “a settled determination of purpose” once he decides he must take full blame for his business going under (p. 695). The word can also indicate the opposite of resolve, as when Affery questions “whether to go in or not”; “the question was settled for her by the door blowing upon her in a violent gust of wind and shutting her out” (p. 339). Mrs. Tickit has “no settled opinion” about the length of time that passed between her two sightings of Tattycoram (p. 513).

³⁴ James Buzard, “‘The Country of the Plague’: Anticulture and Autoethnography in Dickens’s 1850s,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38 (2010), 418, 414.

To settle in *Little Dorrit*, then, means first and foremost to determine: to know what one wants or what one intends to do. At times the word points specifically at its opposite, the ambivalence Anderson identifies throughout the novel, as when the omniscient narrator notes that it “was not quite unanimously settled” whether “the nation was under a load of obligation to the Barnacles, or the Barnacles were under a load of obligation to the nation” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 103). But more often than not, the word signals determination: Mrs. Flintwinch “now began to entertain a settled conviction that there was something wrong in the gloomy house” (p. 182); Amy Dorrit, “having settled that in such a case she would follow them . . . set off afresh for the theatre” (p. 226). To be settled, then, is to have a coherent enough sense of purpose to shape one’s future actions.

Dickens’s biographers have noted the degree to which the author was distinctly *not* settled in the period during which he was writing *Little Dorrit*. According to Jane Smiley, “Dickens’s restlessness infected every facet of his life. In the two years between June 1855 and June 1857, he had bought two new houses, lived at Folkestone, Paris, Boulogne, and London, and traveled besides for speeches and business.”³⁵ Peter Ackroyd notes that Dickens’s “old restlessness had returned” in the period just before starting *Little Dorrit*; writing in Paris as the novel began its serialization, “Dickens was weary, and there was nowhere else to turn” (*Dickens*, pp. 730, 752). His state of mind is reflected both in the meandering plot of *Little Dorrit* and in his personal reflections on Australian emigration. As the author confronts the possibility of settling abroad, he considers what it would entail to settle on a profoundly disruptive course of action. David Copperfield experiences this disruption as a feeling of “unsettlement” in his “own thoughts” as he goes to bid farewell to the Micawbers and is confused by both the disorganized mass of shipboard emigrants and the surprise appearance of his childhood friend and future wife, Agnes (Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 694). In the chaos of the departing Australian emigrant ship, David experiences a congeries of conflicting feelings while attempting to process

³⁵ Jane Smiley, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2002, 2011), p. 130.

“a sight at once so beautiful, so mournful, and so hopeful” (*David Copperfield*, p. 695).

Other novels explicitly about emigration to Australia—novels written by emigrants themselves—demonstrate less ambiguity in the verb *to settle*. Catherine Helen Spence’s 1854 *Clara Morison*, for example, a semiautobiographical novel about a young woman’s emigration to the South Australian colony, opens with a sentence in which “settling” means determining that someone will emigrate (Clara’s uncle settles with himself that his niece will settle abroad): “Mr. Morison had been sitting in his study for half an hour one morning, neither reading nor writing, but apparently settling the pros and cons of some new resolution which he had just formed, or perhaps trying to make it appear as graceful as it was convenient.”³⁶ Mr. Morison has decided to send Clara to Australia, and with this decision he sets in motion everything that happens in Spence’s novel. As in so many novels about Australia, then, settling on settlement is the determining act on which the plot hinges. *Little Dorrit*, by contrast, begins famously with a return home (first to Europe, then England specifically), and Dickens’s characters demonstrate consistent ambiguity with respect to where they should go and whether to remain in any one place.

Thinking about Australian settlement in the mid-Victorian period inspired for the British at home a complex dynamic of opposing sentiments. As Elleke Boehmer notes, in novels such as *David Copperfield* and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), “Australia acts to relieve social and sexual embarrassment.”³⁷ Australia in part solves narrative problems, offering a modern *deus ex machina* for characters no longer welcome in the British social fabric. In this mode William Dorrit fantasizes that life abroad will allow him and his family to escape their past: “If I can put that aside, if I can eradicate the marks of what I have endured, and can emerge before the world a—ha—gentleman unspoiled, unspotted—is it a great deal to expect . . . that my children should—hum—do the same, and sweep that accursed

³⁶ [Catherine Helen Spence], *Clara Morison: A Tale of South Australia during the Gold Fever*, 2 vols. (London: John W. Parker, 1854), I, 1.

³⁷ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Imperial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p. 28.

experience off the face of the earth!" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 464). Alternatively, emigration for many Britons was the cause of deep concern, a rupturing of that same social fabric. In this spirit, Jude Piesse writes of "the damaging evacuations, divergences, and threats associated with emigrant mobility" (*British Settler Emigration in Print*, p. 80). If we are to read *Little Dorrit* as an indirect meditation on Australian settlement, then this larger cultural ambivalence about emigration helps make sense of what Jonathan Grossman calls the novel's "irresolution" and its "vastly shrunken field for individual agency."³⁸ As in the novel itself, Dickens knows not how to settle on his future. He struggles to determine whether emigration would solve his personal and professional troubles.



Ultimately, *Little Dorrit* fails to locate reconciliation in either emigration or transportation. Though the novel proposes an escape from England for life abroad, its conclusion instead settles quietly in the streets of London "in the autumn morning sun's bright rays" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 801). Indeed, Dickens's novel firmly situates the verb *to settle* in a domestic, bourgeois epistemology. Because it does so, we may read *Little Dorrit* as upholding Edward Said's claim that, until the end of the nineteenth century, "outlying territories are available for use, at will, at the novelist's discretion, usually for relatively simple purposes such as immigration, fortune, or exile."³⁹ Emigration serves as a conceptual counterpoint for Dickens, even as *Little Dorrit* resists deep engagement, and the consideration of a life abroad is crucial to the novel's dénouement. The conclusion is of a piece with Dickens's overarching structural push-and-pull: in Grossman's terms, "a world in which every downward thrust can be reframed in terms of an upward resistance" (*Charles Dickens's Networks*, p. 172). Hilary M. Schor notes similarly the novel's "constant reversals

³⁸ Jonathan H. Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 161.

³⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 74.

and inversions.”⁴⁰ In this context of reversals, the counterfactual abandonment of England—what could have happened but did not—facilitates Clennam and Amy’s “modest life of usefulness and happiness” at home (*Little Dorrit*, p. 801).⁴¹ I have been arguing that this structural back-and-forth, paradigmatic of *Little Dorrit*, reflects a broader mid-century phenomenon: the bourgeois narrative’s deflection of colonial expansion, Indigenous displacement, and violence in favor of domestic resolutions *enabled by* the refused possibility of emigration.

A quarter century later, in his well-known 1881 lecture *The Expansion of England*, J. R. Seeley would note that Britain seemed, “as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind”—as if, in taking place elsewhere, the work of colonial and imperial expansion had failed to register concretely in the British consciousness.⁴² Seeley continues: “We constantly betray by our modes of speech that we do not reckon our colonies as really belonging to us; thus if we are asked what the English population is, it does not occur to us to reckon in the population of Canada and Australia” (*The Expansion of England*, pp. 8–9). Seeley himself betrays in this second point the exaggeration of his first. The reality was not so much that British colonialism took place “in a fit of absence of mind,” but instead that the preponderance of the British middle classes failed to see those spaces as “really belonging to [them].” Works of narrative fiction such as *Little Dorrit* help make sense of the colonialist psychology that Seeley describes, in which pushing the colony out of mind enabled attention to economic concerns at home: the establishment of bourgeois economic stability. Amy and Arthur forge a life for themselves in London only after foreclosing the possibilities that might have taken them elsewhere.

⁴⁰ Hilary M. Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), p. 124.

⁴¹ In making this argument, I follow other scholars in finding Australia a conceptual destabilizer, a foil to disrupt interpretation. See for example Giles, *Antipodean America*.

⁴² J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), p. 8.

Little Dorrit thus concludes by going “down,” but not down under. Following their marriage ceremony, Amy and Arthur

went down to give a mother’s care. . . . Went down to give a tender nurse and friend. . . . They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (*Little Dorrit*, pp. 801–2)

The key shift that facilitates their absorption into London is economic: the resolution of their financial concerns. No longer aimless wanderers, and no longer in states of economic precarity, the married couple commits to a life of service to their community. In so doing, Amy and Arthur offer a counterpoint to the noisy, eager, arrogant, and froward world of barnacles, those fellow citizens who talk in circles while never quite doing anything but ensuring their own good fortunes (which fortunes, crucially, depend on imperial machinations abroad). To get beyond circumlocution, beyond wandering, and beyond the alienation that Amanda Anderson and other readers of this novel have diagnosed, Arthur Clennam must attach himself to a bourgeois and domestic life: as Daniel Doyce’s business partner, as Amy Dorrit’s husband, as a resident in the “frett[ing], and chaf[ing]” London streets that “made their usual uproar.”

This concluding attachment to bourgeois London and the accompanying foreclosure of *Little Dorrit*’s Australian possibilities participate in a broader British practice, later diagnosed by Seeley, of spurning colonial thought in favor of the domestic. Dickens sets a circuitous course through a world of possible migrations so as to land his British readers insistently back at their own doorsteps. In launching individuals across great distances (Arthur’s many years in China; Amy’s crossing of the Alps to Italy), and in giving his protagonists the choice of where to take themselves, Dickens ultimately encourages his readers to appreciate the modesty of remaining at home, rooted but not quite fixed in place. A less generous reading of the novel may also locate in Dickens’s refusal of life abroad the inability to imagine in a meaningful way the experiences of those who chose not to stay, or the colonial violence undergirding

London's mid-century bourgeois privilege.⁴³ Dickens instead fabricates an alternative to the state of mind he described in his April 1856 letter to Forster: "to be never at rest, and never satisfied, and ever trying after something that is never reached, and to be always laden with plot and plan and care and worry." Though he would later send two of his sons to live in Australia, Dickens himself chose not to emigrate, discovering instead a *domestic* resolution to the challenges of plot and plan and care and worry.⁴⁴

The connections between *Little Dorrit* and Australia are thus demonstrably hypothetical and counterfactual: a fleeting wish on Dickens's part, a fugitive allusion, the desire for something to have been different from what it was. *Great Expectations*, Dickens's next novel, would make explicit the interlinking of Britain and Australia, the domestic and the colony, by taking a more explicitly pessimistic view of this connection. Whereas *Little Dorrit's* sentimentality locates the domestic as a potential solution to the ills of the world, *Great Expectations* offers Pip little in the way of domestic redemption. For Pip, Australia is literally the unthought possibility that shapes the narrative as he tells it.⁴⁵ Magwitch's return from the colony, as Dorice Williams Elliott argues, "disrupt[s] the story of the new English national subject, the bourgeois gentleman."⁴⁶ Even more, the Magwitch narrative makes unmistakable what is obfuscated in *Little Dorrit*, the degree to which labor abroad (so long as it stayed there) was constitutive of mid-century bourgeois life in Britain. For the London of *Little Dorrit*, however, Australia remains unarticulated, and the refused possibility of colonial life abroad allows

⁴³ Freedgood, in *The Ideas in Things*, offers the most compelling reading of this nature.

⁴⁴ On the emigration to Australia of Alfred Tennyson Dickens and Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens, see Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 878.

⁴⁵ My thanks to Jonathan Grossman for this point.

⁴⁶ Dorice Williams Elliott, *Transported to Botany Bay: Class, National Identity, and the Literary Figure of the Australian Convict* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2019), p. 57. Said notes: "The prohibition placed on Magwitch's return is not only penal but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed a 'return' to metropolitan space, which, as all Dickens's fiction testifies, is meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages" (*Culture and Imperialism*, p. xvi).

Dickens and his creations a tentative peace with the life immediately before them: the domestic and newly middle-class “uproar” of nineteenth-century London (*Little Dorrit*, p. 802).

University of Maryland

ABSTRACT

Jason R. Rudy, “Settled: *Dorrit* Down Under” (pp. 184–206)

Although the conclusion to Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) finds the protagonists Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit comfortably situated in London, the novel’s long and meandering narrative entertains alternate possibilities. This essay considers the relation of emigration to British middle-class identity, both in the historical context of the 1850s and in the fictional world of Dickens’s novel. Australian free emigration, which saw a significant rise in the 1850s, serves as a limit case against which to test the significance of remaining at home in England. *Little Dorrit* is a novel that “settles” on a domestic life of bourgeois stability, but it arrives at this conclusion only after contemplating less-predictable futures abroad. Dickens himself considered emigrating to Australia while writing *Little Dorrit*, and the novel’s quiet conclusion reflects the author’s own conflicted resolution to forego life beyond British shores. Dickens’s novel ultimately suggests that Victorian middle-class stability depended at least in part on the rejection of economic possibilities abroad.

Keywords: Charles Dickens; *Little Dorrit*; Australia; emigration; middle-class identity