

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: 029 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Enhancing Public Understanding of Dickens and 19th Century London
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has been credited with enabling a 'reinvention' of biography. His studies of Charles Dickens and 19th century London have been communicated to a diverse audience in the UK and worldwide through his work as a biographer and an advisor on highly regarded TV adaptations of classic novels. His contributions to events marking the bicentenary of Dickens's birth include advising on BBC1's 3-part adaptation of <i>Great Expectations</i> (2011), assisting with sound historical and creative interpretation to support the film's educational, cultural and market value. Wider public understanding of the life and motivations of Dickens was achieved through various means including television and radio appearances, newspaper articles, blogs, podcasts, and public speaking engagements.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The main strand of Douglas-Fairhurst's research during this assessment period concerns Dickens and his context. The most significant output is <i>Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist</i> (2011), a critical biography offering a fresh investigation into the personal and cultural factors that led to an unknown legal clerk becoming the most famous novelist in the world. The originality of this book lies in its revelation of how often Dickens's career turned on an unpredictable mixture of choice and chance, and how haunted his fiction remained by the ghostly alternative selves that circumstances did not allow to flourish: (positively) the actor, stage-manager, clerk, journalist, he might have been; (negatively) the man who might never have made it out of a life of menial or relatively menial labour. The biography is an important contribution to an emerging trend, among life-writers, towards engaging imaginatively with plausible 'counterfactuals'—the lives that might have been lived, which run in parallel with and have a bearing (emotional, ethical, or critical) on the subject's and his or her contemporaries' understanding of the meaning and value of the life observably lived. It also reinforces a move away from 'full' lives towards biographical slices or snapshots in time. As one reviewer put it: '<i>Becoming Dickens</i> never takes Dickens for granted, but helps us to be surprised--shocked even--that he existed, worked and wrote in the way that he did. This counterfactual emphasis gives the book breathing space and a sense of play that is too often missing from more orthodoxly organized biographies.' (John Bowen, University of York, prepublication review at http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674050037&content=reviews)</p> <p>Central to the research was the establishment of a fresh perspective on Dickens's cultural context as a London writer of the 1830s. The biography includes extensive original investigation into the worlds of politics and journalism that launched Dickens's career, and explains in detail how these experiences informed his literary style. This work built on research Douglas-Fairhurst had previously undertaken for a new critical edition of Henry Mayhew's <i>London Labour and the London Poor</i> (2010) with a long critical introduction and detailed explanatory notes.</p> <p><i>Becoming Dickens</i> was the culmination of a four-year period of research during which Douglas-Fairhurst produced several related publications, all disseminated to a broad non-academic readership. They include an essay on Dickens published in <i>The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists</i>, ed. Adrian Poole (2009); a new edition of Dickens's <i>Great Expectations</i> (2008) in which Douglas-Fairhurst discussed popular adaptations of the novel and reprinted (for the first time) part of a rare theatrical version either written by Dickens or done with his blessing; and a detailed critical essay on Dickens's style.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>1. <u>Authored or edited books</u></p> <p>i) <i>Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist</i> (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2011). REF2: Douglas-Fairhurst – N01</p>

Winner of the Duff Cooper Prize 2011. Selected as a Book of the Year in the *Irish Times*, *Library Journal*, *New Statesman*, *Sunday Times*, *Telegraph*, *TLS*, and *Wall Street Journal*, and as an Editor's Choice in the *New York Times*. Featured on BBC2's *The Review Show*. Collected reviews at <http://www.amazon.com/Becoming-Dickens-Invention-Robert-Douglas-Fairhurst/dp/0674050037>; highlights at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674050037>

ii) Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, with an introduction and notes by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Available on ProQuest ebrary

iii) Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Available on request.

Chosen as a Book of the Year in the *Evening Standard* ('a superb new edition' – Ian Thomson). Sales of over 9000 copies to date, and net revenue of £46,600.

2. Articles

i) 'Dickens', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists*, ed. Adrian Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). DOI: 10.1017/CCOL9780521871198.009

'[E]xceptional ... The discoveries of Douglas-Fairhurst's close reading yield a new way of thinking about this familiar writer' (Leo Robson, *New Statesman*).

ii) 'Dickens's Rhythms', in *Dickens and Style*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Available on request.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Douglas-Fairhurst's research has **enhanced understanding of Dickens** for a wide variety of audiences, refreshing and challenging conventional readings of the writer's life: numerous reviewers have observed the striking revisionism of the biography (Ref. i). *Becoming Dickens* sold 11,000 copies in all formats (slightly over 9,000 in hardcover), and is described by his editor at Harvard UP as '**financially successful**' (profits not disclosed) (Ref. 1). A measure of its **reach** is international media coverage: the book was reviewed over 100 times by newspapers in countries including the UK, USA, Australia, India, Croatia, and the UAE. It was featured on an edition of the BBC2 Review Show entitled 'Charles Dickens in Biography' (average viewing figures c. 450,000), and was the focus of a special edition of the Australian radio programme 'Lingua Franca' (ABC Radio National Australia: average listening figures c. 45,000 in 5 cities, with additional listeners nationwide and worldwide via the internet). The biography has been studied by numerous book groups, including the Sewanee Book Club (Tennessee), the American Association of University Women Book Groups (Pennsylvania Branch and Schenectady NY Branch), and the Friends of the Palo Alto Library Book Discussion Group (California). An indicative comment comes from Indian novelist and blogger Chandrabhas Choudhury, who argues that *Becoming Dickens* shows that 'If the reason we are attracted to biography is the allure of the drama of human self-fashioning seen from the inside, then these rewards can just as well be gleaned by the choice of a suite of years, and not the whole life. ... The excitement of this method – that of the partial, but pointed, biography – is that it is defamiliarising, hovering not above its subject but beside it' (Ref. ii). The **international impact** of the biography is further evidenced by its translation into Chinese.

Douglas-Fairhurst **enriched debate about Dickens's cultural significance** in the bicentenary year (2011-12) through numerous interactions with media and the public. He participated in an hour long discussion of Dickens's life and legacy with a panel including Simon Callow and Salman Rushdie on PBS's *Charlie Rose Show* (average viewing figures c. 300,000), first broadcast in February 2012 and repeated on Christmas day 2012 (Ref. iii). He authored articles in several national UK newspapers with a wide circulation, including (as part of the *Guardian's* build-up to the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens) 'My Favourite Dickens: *Great Expectations*' (*Guardian*, 23 September 2011) and 'Dickens on Screen: The Highs and Lows' (*Guardian*, 23 December 2011); also 'The Sparkler of Albion: The Many Faces of Charles Dickens' (*Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2011); and 'The Roads Not Taken' (*New Statesman*, 10 October 2011). Douglas-Fairhurst wrote blog entries for two popular American websites run by the Campaign for the

American Reader: 'The Page 99 Test' (Ref. iv) and 'My Book, The Movie' (Ref. v), and contributed an analysis of the best Dickens novels and criticism to the *Smithsonian Magazine* (Ref. vi). He also filmed a podcast for the Podularity website (Ref. vii). He was featured on the cover of the magazine *Oxford Today* (to which he contributed an article on parallels between Dickens's world and our own), and recorded a free access introduction to Dickens for Oxford University's 'Great Writers' project (1786 hits by the end of the audited period).

Face to face engagement with the general public includes the event 'Why Dickens?', co-hosted by Douglas-Fairhurst with Prof John Carey at the British Academy, which attracted a capacity audience of 230 and prompted vigorous discussion about the development of Dickens's career and his contemporary relevance. Douglas-Fairhurst spoke on numerous occasions about Dickens to audiences of between 20 and 200 people in a variety of settings (including schools, churches, literary societies, libraries, and literary festivals) across the UK. He gave invited lectures to general audiences (students and members of the public as well as academics) in London, Durham, York, Leicester, Bologna, Hong Kong, New Orleans, Virginia, and Indiana (total audience attendance c. 2000). A representative response comes from an attendee of the *Aye Write!* literary festival, Glasgow: "Why Dickens?" This seemingly straightforward question was the premise of the excellent talk given by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst ... [which] proved him an inimitable Dickens scholar ... [H]is knowledge and insight into Dickens the man made for a entertaining and informative evening' (Ref. viii). Several of these engagements drew on Douglas-Fairhurst's specialist knowledge of Dickens's London: for example, his contribution to the series of 'Talks on the Thames' hosted by Somerset House (Ref. ix).

Douglas-Fairhurst has made significant **contributions to film and other creative industries**, using his expertise on Dickens and Dickensian London to **assist sound new interpretations**. In 2010 he was appointed historical advisor on a major 3-part adaptation of *Great Expectations*, co-produced by the BBC with PBS Masterpiece. It was viewed by millions across the UK when it aired over Christmas 2011 as the flagship programme in the BBC's Dickens season, the three episodes garnering audiences of 7.57m, 7.19m, and 6.97m (ranking 11, 12 and 13 in BBC1's popularity ratings for the week ending 1 January) (Ref. x). Douglas-Fairhurst read successive drafts of the scripts, commented on their historical accuracy, suggested revisions to the dialogue, discussed the novel's historical context and major themes with the director (Brian Kirk), answered queries from the design team, and was available during filming to advise actors. Much of this knowledge was acquired while researching the edition of *Great Expectations* (the edition has sold over 60,000 copies to date, to the value of £125,900 for OUP), but the research for *Becoming Dickens* also had a significant impact on the visual style of the film. According to producer George Ormond, 'Robert was invaluable in helping us realise *Great Expectations*. He fed in research as we developed the script, advising on everything from what kind of drinks Mrs Joe might serve at Christmas to Pumblechook, to Dickens' obsession with dirt, to what a London street might feel like. Brian Kirk ... and I spent time with Robert discussing details of the production like how best to realise Dickensian London, and what the world of the marshes might feel like. Robert's advice and research was made available to and used by every department, from costume, to design, to hair and makeup' (Ref. 2). The effectiveness of the contribution to **high quality broadcasting** is evidenced by the many awards it garnered, including 3 Baftas, 4 Emmys, and 2 Royal Television Society Awards. Douglas-Fairhurst assisted the BBC's promotional activities by publishing two articles in the *Guardian* (see 3.2 above), contributing to a feature on fashion inspired by Miss Havisham ('It Girl', *Interview Magazine*, August 2011), and participating in a Dickens Day at Foyles, where he discussed (to an audience of c. 100) the problems of adapting classic novels for the screen with screenwriter Sarah Phelps (Ref. xi).

Douglas-Fairhurst was subsequently (December 2011) an informal advisor and on-screen contributor to BBC2's 'Mrs Dickens's Family Christmas', exploring Dickens's early life and the factors that led to the failure of his marriage. This programme (viewing figures 1.5 million) used *Becoming Dickens* as one of its principal research resources, influencing both the script and the visual style (the claim is corroborated by the programme's executive producer, Basil Comely (Ref. 3)).

Further advisory work for creative content producers includes the provision of an original framework for the project 'Our Mutual Friends' undertaken by film production company Film and Video Umbrella (a commissioning agency and client organisation of Arts Council England) to accompany a series of specially commissioned artworks connecting Dickens's legacy with modern social media (see <http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/group-details/our-mutual-friends/>). Steven Boden, director, reports that 'Robert was a great supporter and advisor on the concept': 'Our Mutual Friends was a new initiative for us, and, arguably, one of the first projects of its type to try and integrate and mobilise social media creatively, rather than just promotionally, within a conceptual/curatorial framework'; Robert enabled us 'to compare the "dustheaps" of Victorian London that feature in the Dickens novel with all the digital detritus we accumulate today, and the salon-society social whirl that embellishes and punctuates the book with the flurry of social media activity as characterised by the contemporary phenomena of Twitter, Facebook etc.' (Ref. 4).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

- (1). Email from editor at Harvard UP.
- (2). Corroborating email from Producer of *Great Expectations*, BBC, 22.3.13.
- (3). Email from Executive Producer of *Mrs Dickens's Family Christmas*, BBC, 25.3.13.
- (4). Email from Director, Film and Video Umbrella, 27.3.13.

Other evidence sources

- (i). 'Reinvention of biography' quotation: Frances Wilson, *Times Literary Supplement* 2 December 2011. http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/other_categories/article833726.ece
- (ii). Chandrahas blog: <http://middlestage.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/on-robert-douglas-fairhursts-becoming.html>
- (iii). 'Charles Dickens at 200', Charlie Rose Show, 17 February and repeated 25 December 2012, with Simon Callow, Salman Rushdie et al., *PBS* broadcasting, USA: <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/1216>
- (iv). American reader blogspots: <http://page99test.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/robert-douglas-fairhursts-becoming.html>
- (v). <http://mybookthemovie.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/robert-douglas-fairhursts-becoming.html>
- (vi). *Smithsonian Magazine*: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/The-Essentials-Charles-Dickens.html>
- (vii). <http://podularity.com/2011/09/10/robert-douglas-fairhurst-on-becoming-dickens/>
- (viii). Review of 'Why Dickens?' at the Aye Write! literary festival (Glasgow): <http://glasgowbookgroups.wordpress.com/2012/03/12/becoming-dickens-reviewed-by-lauren>
- (ix). <http://www.somersethouse.org.uk/literature/tales-of-the-thames-a-day-downriver-at-somerset-house>
- (x). Viewing figures from *BARB*: <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing/weekly-top-30> for BBC1 week Dec26 – Jan01 2012.
- (xi). <http://www.foyles.co.uk/Dickens-Day>