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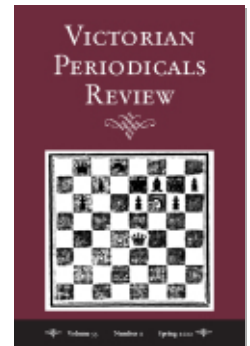
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Abetting “Literary Sins”: The *Dickensian* and the *Drood* Phenomenon

KARI DALY

In April 1870 Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* debuted to sales of over fifty thousand copies.¹ While there was excitement surrounding this text, there was initially little speculation about the plot while it was being serialized. But then Charles Dickens passed away in June, leaving an unfinished manuscript and a mystery that continued to haunt readers.² Theories as to Dickens's intentions trickled into periodicals over the next couple of decades, and in 1905 the floodgates suddenly opened. The discussion rapidly proliferated across periodicals, attracting more and more commentators from different backgrounds. By 1914 the debate over Dickens's planned conclusion for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* had reached a fever pitch, culminating in a full-blown mock trial of the book's villain, John Jasper. In his comprehensive annotated bibliography of the novel, Don Richard Cox calls the years 1905 to 1915 “the golden decade” of *Drood* commentary, a period in which one-fourth of the entries in the entire bibliography were published.³

What was it about the years between 1905 and 1915 that caused theories of this novel to suddenly abound thirty-five years after Dickens's death? Cox suggests that the reason for this anomaly partly lies in the forming of the Dickens Fellowship and the publication of the fellowship's journal, the *Dickensian*, in 1905. The Dickens Fellowship provided “an audience ready and waiting” to examine evidence pertaining to *Drood*, Cox argues.⁴ In this essay, I would like to put pressure on Cox's assertion of cause and effect by reading his holistic perspective of the *Drood* phenomenon alongside close readings of *Drood*-related commentaries in the *Dickensian* (hereafter referred to as Droodiana).⁵ While there was indeed a small audience ready and waiting, the *Dickensian* reached beyond the fellowship and helped create a common audience for *The Mystery of Edwin*

Drood. Through its editors' conscious efforts to establish a common language for the community, the *Dickensian* formed a space in which professionals and lay readers could meet to discuss literature. It is owing to this space, I argue, that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* has kept our interest to the present day.

The *Dickensian* accomplished this feat by bringing three different groups of Dickens lovers together—professionals such as publishers and literary journalists, lay readers, and academics—and actively feeding their interest in Dickens's last novel. Within its pages, we can see the journal's editors encouraging interest in *Drood* through popular culture while also attempting to sift between madcap theories and academic scholarship. This careful curation of Droodiana functioned to maintain, for a short time anyway, an inclusive space where distinctions between literary musings, fandom, and academic scholarship were blurred. This inclusion, in turn, led to a greater appreciation for a novel that might otherwise have been lost in Dickens's oeuvre after his death. Between the years 1905 and 1915, then, the *Dickensian* offers a case study for how opening the literary conversation to a wider audience can help promote the study of forgotten or underrepresented Victorian works.

Creating Space: 1870–1905

As Juliet John establishes in *Dickens and Mass Culture*, Charles Dickens consciously orchestrated the “Dickens industry” throughout his writing career, utilizing mass culture to get his works into the hands of as many people as possible.⁶ Dickens took advantage of serialization, theater, and public readings to appeal to all classes in an effort to advance social justice issues and create a unified reading community.⁷ Laying the groundwork for this industry in his lifetime helped Dickens to extend his legacy. Following his death, sales of Dickens's work skyrocketed, partly owing to shrewd strategies implemented by Dickens's publisher, Chapman and Hall. The Household Edition, released in 1871, was designed to be within the middle- and working-class budget, and Chapman and Hall would continue to produce cheaper editions of Dickens's works in the decades after his death, especially in the early twentieth century just before the copyrights were about to expire.⁸ As George H. Ford notes in his foundational work about Dickens's readers, sales averaged 330,000 copies a year in the two decades after Dickens's death, four times as many sales in 1891 as in 1869.⁹

But this very popularity worked to stymie Dickens's credentials as an artist. Philip Waller asserts that Dickens's popularity “suggested an intellectual shallowness which worried the canonically minded,” an anxiety that Waller argues is reflected in Leslie Stephen's work on the *Dictionary*

of *National Biography* (1885–1900).¹⁰ Stephen's influential multivolume work, Waller asserts, casts an equivocal "verdict" on Dickens's novels even as they continued to sell to readers less concerned with the reputation of the English literary canon.¹¹ The cheapness and accessibility of Dickens's works sullied a reputation that had already been called into question during his lifetime for lacking in realism.¹² The lay reader's continued adoration would further dampen his literary legitimacy in the eyes of scholars until the 1940s.¹³

In 1902 a group of fans came together to combat Dickens's declining reputation and to celebrate the author whom they had never stopped revering. Ignoring the "process of dethroning" Dickens by the literary elite, the Dickens Fellowship brought together the reader who had been quietly reading his Dickens and a small but vocal group of devotees among the professional class.¹⁴ From the beginning, this gathering was designed to be genial and inclusive. It was, in essence, a Dickens fan club that emphasized "companionship among admirers of an author."¹⁵ In addition to enjoying Dickens's works, the fellowship invested in charitable projects in the spirit of the author and attempted to preserve buildings and other locations associated with Dickens's life. At a time when Dickens was considered "a writer whom critical readers outgrow," the fellowship provided an opportunity for fans to share their admiration without shame.¹⁶

The success of the fellowship led to the publication of their journal, the *Dickensian*, in 1905. According to the preface to the first issue, the fellowship had grown to 6,500 members by this time. At thirty-two pages and the affordable rate of three pence, the *Dickensian* professed to be "devoted to the vast subject of Dickens generally . . . indeed, anything and everything likely to interest the student and lover of England's great novelist."¹⁷ As Leon Litvack asserts, this broad range led to a "peculiar" journal: one that sought, like the fellowship, to celebrate Dickens while also appealing to "the more serious student of Dickens's life and work."¹⁸ Unlike journals such as the *Academy* (which had begun its transition toward a more academic bent in the 1870s), the *Dickensian* attempted to cater to all parties.¹⁹

Scholars typically divide these different readers into two camps: professionals and lay readers.²⁰ But a more granular approach can highlight the magnitude of what the journal managed to accomplish between 1905 and 1915. While "professionals" typically includes publishers, journalists, and academics, the *Dickensian* began to publish on the heels of a "chaotic" period in which the distinctions between these three groups had begun to crystallize, as Laurel Brake demonstrates.²¹ Further, literature was becoming the purview of the academy as the canon of English literature was becoming established in the early twentieth century.²² Dickens occupied an interesting position: although immensely popular with publishers and

accessible enough to boost journal sales to the population of middle-class readers, his works were not quite considered Literature with a capital *L*. There was a spectrum of readers, therefore, moving from those who celebrated Dickens unabashedly (lay readers) to those who perhaps rationalized their love of Dickens through their professional work (publishers and some literary journalists) and those who went against the grain to write about Dickens (academics). The *Dickensian* can be seen as juggling not only two but three camps of readers.

Dickens's last novel would prove to be the training ground for the *Dickensian's* balance of serving these different readers, a balance that it continues to maintain today, with differing levels of success.²³ Coming into being amidst growing divisions between professionals, lay readers, and academics, the journal took it upon itself to collect and organize criticism around Dickens's works. Though it may have wanted to be more of an academic publication from the beginning, as Litvack observes, the *Dickensian* never quite cut ties with the professionals and lay readers.²⁴ This led the journal's editors to develop new strategies that were honed through the handling of the *Drood* phenomenon.

To be clear, the *Dickensian* did not magically manifest interest in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* on its own. Parodies of the novel began to spring up immediately upon the first serial installment, with continuations following Dickens's death.²⁵ Steven Connor argues that speculation surrounding *Drood* functions as a continuation of the story and that, by focusing on Dickens's half-finished tale, his fans were able to keep his memory alive.²⁶ I suggest that these continuations are also evidence that his fans felt empowered to add their voices to a literary discussion centered around Dickens's intent. The *Dickensian* capitalized on this by consolidating existing commentary and providing the space for new conversations about *Drood* to take place. By and large, the *Dickensian* was the only steady publisher of *Drood* commentary between 1905 and 1915, and it published significantly more pieces on *Drood* than any other periodical. It might seem obvious that a Dickens-themed publication would outrank generalist periodicals in anything Dickens. It is worth noting, therefore, that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* dominates the *Dickensian's* pages during this time. According to the indexes of the bound volumes, *Drood* is consistently among the top five Dickens works featured within the journal's pages. Indeed, *Drood* is among the top two (frequently neck and neck with *The Pickwick Papers*) every year except for four.

The *Dickensian* also influenced publications such as the *Daily Chronicle*, the *British Weekly*, and the *Cambridge Review*, among others, which consistently followed its lead. When the *Dickensian* ceased to print pieces during its two moratoriums between the years 1905 and 1915, other pub-

lications exhibited a sharp drop in published commentary as well.²⁷ For instance, during the journal's moratorium of 1909–10, Cox's bibliography notes only two *Drood*-focused entries and two entries that mention *Drood* tangentially. The following year, when the *Dickensian* lifted the moratorium, *Drood* pieces jumped up to almost forty articles and letters across all British publications. When commentary was stalled in the *Dickensian*, it did not migrate elsewhere; when moratoriums at the *Dickensian* were lifted, other publications followed suit.

The key word here is commentary. In his bibliography, Cox warns against using the word "criticism" when referring to Droodiana; as he points out, many of the writings about *Drood* are not what we would recognize today as literary criticism.²⁸ I would argue, however, that this is precisely what makes the *Drood* discussion in the first decades of the nineteenth century so fascinating. In the mixture of musings, reviews, academic debates, witticisms, and sometimes personal attacks that were shared among readers in the *Dickensian*, we can discern how the journal provided a common ground for individuals from various backgrounds to interact. By making space for commentary, as opposed to solely devoting itself to literary criticism, the *Dickensian* created an inclusive space for professionals, lay readers, and academics to exchange ideas in a shared language.

If, as Fionnuala Dillane has argued, the periodical press functioned as a "generator" of imagined communities, then we can understand the *Dickensian* as primarily responsible for creating an imagined community around *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.²⁹ The *Drood* phenomenon then, is defined not just by the explosion in commentary in the early twentieth century but by the creation of this community. Like Dickens's public readings, which, as Helen Small observes, were "conceived and promoted as occasions which would bring together readers from widely differing social backgrounds," Droodiana attracted individuals from a variety of social backgrounds.³⁰ Historically, critics have separated *Drood* fans (hereafter referred to as Droodians) from academic scholars. Ford points to this dichotomy when he comments that *Drood* had, for the most part, attracted "the work of amateurs whose enthusiasm is equaled only by their critical and scholarly innocence."³¹ Along these lines, Robert Barnard has remarked that "Droodians seem very frequently to not be Dickensians and unfortunately many Dickensians are not Droodians."³² But when we analyze *Drood* commentary in the *Dickensian* between 1905 and 1915, a different picture begins to emerge. During this decade, the debate was carried on not only by lay readers and amateur sleuths but also by professionals and academics. As the *Dickensian's* pages demonstrate, for a short time at least, Droodians and Dickensians were the same.

This blurring of boundaries was exemplified by the journal's first editor, B. W. Matz, a man who encapsulated all three types of reader himself:

professional, lay reader, and academic. Described by his contemporaries as “the greatest of all Dickensians,” Matz was first and foremost a professional; he worked for Dickens’s publishers, Chapman and Hall, for over forty years.³³ Crucially, he was also an independent scholar. In his capacity at Chapman and Hall, Matz edited the Memorial Edition of John Forster’s *Life of Dickens*. He also edited four Dickens-themed issues of the *Bookman* and was the first to gather Dickens’s writing for journals other than his own (*Household Words* and *All the Year Round*) into a collection known as the “Miscellaneous Papers,” among other achievements.³⁴ Significantly, Matz was possessed by an interest in solving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, an interest which initially aligned him more with the lay reader than with the professional or academic. Straddling the lines between these apparently distinct reader groups, Matz was in an ideal position to establish the rules for the exchange of Droodiana. Through his editorial addresses to readers in the recurring column “When Found—,” his curation of letters and articles within the journal, and the roundup of Dickens-related commentary from other sources reprinted in the “Dickensia” section, we can see Matz creating a language in which the *Drood* conversation could take place. Accessible to most everyone, this language nevertheless adhered to certain parameters, foregrounding historical analysis and close readings and rejecting unsubstantiated or ill-conceived theories. The tone of Matz’s address to the reader teeters between encouraging and becoming exasperated with the *Drood* discussion. Like a bystander who is unable to look away from a car wreck, he is deeply engrossed despite himself. In his editor’s notes and the choices he makes throughout the golden decade, we can see Matz trying to impose the rules of discourse for this unique community he has helped foster.

Adopting a Language: 1905–8

Though taking place in the twentieth century, the *Drood* phenomenon began in nineteenth-century fashion: in the letters sections of periodicals.³⁵ This correspondence was a more refined development of the creative theorizing that had been taking place through continuations and adaptations (particularly stage adaptations) since Dickens’s death in 1870. Among those writing letters about *Drood* to various periodicals was the academic Richard Proctor, who developed his solution to the mystery through a series of pieces in *Belgravia* and *Knowledge*.³⁶ These myriad letters and articles became Proctor’s 1887 volume, *Watched by the Dead: A Loving Study of Dickens’s Half-Told Tale*. In this first book-length study of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Proctor analyzes Dickens’s other works to establish a pattern of villains being secretly observed by those they have wronged

and, thus, to claim that Edwin Drood is not dead but in hiding.³⁷ As Peter Orford has noted, Proctor's work stands out for its emphasis on divining Dickens's intent rather than merely entertaining readers.³⁸ Yet Proctor is not interested in solving the mystery per se, telling the reader in his preface, "My main object in writing this little work has been that others may enjoy the pleasure which the reading and re-reading of Dickens's unfinished masterpiece has afforded me"; he wants to foster a new appreciation of Dickens's forgotten tale.³⁹ When the *Drood* debate began to heat up in early 1905 with the publishing of J. Cuming Walters's *Clues to Dickens's Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the line between fandom and academic scholarship became even less distinct. Walters, a literary journalist and Shakespearean lecturer, engaged in a series of letters in periodicals and eventually penned a response to Proctor's nearly twenty-year-old book, contending that Helena Landless is masquerading as Datchery.⁴⁰ His consistent and persuasive defense of this idea would become so ingrained in the scholarly imagination that even in 1940 Edmund Wilson would describe the Helena-Datchery theory as "the first of the most important discoveries about *Drood*."⁴¹ Thus we see how speculative commentary was construed as fact well into the age of modern literary criticism.

In the publication of *Watched by the Dead* and *Clues*, Proctor and Walters appear to be precursors of what Henry Jenkins has termed the "acafan": an amalgamation of an academic and a passionate fan who openly rejects the aesthetic distance that bourgeois taste dictates.⁴² Jenkins's term, initially developed in respect to twentieth-century television, may seem an unusual choice to apply to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars, but like these latter-day acafans, Proctor and Walters (and many others who would follow them) defied convention. They were writing not only about something considered unscholarly but also in a decidedly non-academic language. Orford argues that Proctor's work was "as much a manifesto as a solution."⁴³ Open interest in Dickens and his unfinished tale was unfashionable, which is evident in the continued use of pseudonyms by those involved in the *Drood* phenomenon, including Proctor initially, long after pseudonyms had begun to fade away.⁴⁴

Unlike most Droodians who came before him, however, Walters did not use a pseudonym for his work, a move that paved the way for legitimizing Droodiana in the eyes of other would-be acafans. *Clues* subsequently attracted the interest of Andrew Lang, a fellow of the British Royal Academy and a folklore scholar. Lang had written the introductions to the Gadshill Edition of Dickens's works published by Chapman and Hall in 1899, and his steady presence in the *Drood* debate until his death in 1912 would continue to lend literary creditability to Droodians. He and Walters exchanged a series of letters in 1905 privately and through the

Academy, which led to the publishing of Lang's *The Puzzle of Dickens's Last Plot* late in 1905. Lang's jump into the *Drood* debate represented a significant bridging of the three communities. *The Puzzle of Dickens's Last Plot* stayed within the realm of attempting to solve the mystery, as opposed to engaging in literary criticism that would have alienated Dickens fans, while Lang's identity as an academic scholar and not a journalist (which skeptics may have argued was the case with Walters) invited more acafans to join the conversation. That Lang engaged in a more playful, and therefore more accessible, approach to *Drood* is evident in the reception of his work, which fellow *Dickensian* contributor J. W. T. Ley referred to as possessed of "frivolity."⁴⁵

Significantly, the *Academy*, a scholarly publication, showed no interest in printing Droodiana from anyone else; correspondence was limited to the two scholars, and the publication would not print another piece on *Drood* until its last reference to the work in 1912. The *Dickensian* displayed no qualms about printing Droodiana and, like modern day acafan websites, encouraged discussion around *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, creating in the process a canon of criticism about the novel.⁴⁶ Between the years 1905 and 1915 the journal would twice publish bibliographies of *Drood* criticism, a decision that welcomed new readers to join the discussion along with the existing professionals, lay readers, and academics. The first of these appeared in the May 1905 issue when the journal reprinted a four-part history of solutions to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* that had originally run in the *Manchester Quarterly*. In the *Dickensian*'s July issue, B. W. Matz reviewed Walters's book and continued to keep readers apprised of Walters's correspondence about this work with letter writers in other publications. It is here that Matz begins to establish a common language for the inchoate *Drood* community, the key guidelines for which are laid out in the particular work Matz chooses to review. Walters's *Clues* defines the three chief mysteries of the story: the fate of Drood, the identity of the mysterious character Dick Datchery, and the identity of Princess Puffer. By foregrounding Walters's work, as opposed to those by Proctor or even Lang, Matz signals that future discourse in the *Dickensian* should engage with these mysteries.

By providing a history of the *Drood* debate, guidelines for a common language, and space for correspondence from professionals as well as lay readers and academics, the *Dickensian* not only encouraged the existing Dickens fans to whom Cox alludes in his bibliography but also cultivated a new audience for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The community's explosive growth may be responsible for Matz's tinge of wariness in "When Found—" by the end of the year: "When Mr. Cuming Walters wrote his 'clues' to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, he could have had no idea that it

was destined to create the excitement it has. Everybody seems now busy on a solution, and if we were to publish all the literature on the subject which is dropped stealthily or otherwise into our letter-box, we should require to considerably increase the number of our pages."⁴⁷

Matz's comment here alludes to two important developments. First, the use of the word "stealthily" betrays a kind of guilt that had become inherent in *Drood* commentary. Despite the academic legitimacy lent by writers such as Walters and Lang, some Droodians still appeared to be ashamed of their burgeoning obsession. Walters's later description of writing *Clues* in "a wild moment" points to the embarrassment that scholars—and, to an extent, professionals—would continue to feel over their engrossment in the mystery.⁴⁸ If, as Jenkins indicates, fandom threatens to violate "dominant cultural hierarchies," then interest in Dickens at a time when the English literary canon was being formed was tricky territory; the obsession with an author who was unfashionable was surely something with which a man of letters around 1905 was hesitant to be associated.⁴⁹ Even toward the close of the golden decade, Walters would jokingly refer to his "literary sins" in being involved in the *Drood* debate.⁵⁰

The second development of interest is Matz's wry comment about requiring more pages to accommodate opinions. This hints at a flood of letters coming in behind the scenes. By providing a space for an inclusive community, the *Dickensian* likely attracted more correspondence on *Drood* than a publication like the *Academy* might have. The subsequent weariness and wariness continued into the beginning of 1906: "I continue to receive letters and articles on the Drood question," Matz writes in the journal notes in January, "most of which traverses ground already gone over so much."⁵¹ Though the *Dickensian* was apparently receiving a lot of correspondence at this point, Matz implies that not much of this material was useful for advancing *Drood* studies. Nevertheless, the journal continued to cater to Droodian interest in the January 1906 issue by alerting readers to Walters's upcoming lecture on *Drood* at the fellowship's March meeting with a debate to follow. The tone of this "When Found—" entry, along with the items selected to appear in print, suggests that Matz is carefully sorting Droodiana in an effort to curate the commentary. As a result, the *Dickensian* allowed only eight references to *Drood* to populate its pages that year. Among these are a review of Lang's book, a topographical study on Cloisterham, and a short historical piece on "The Real P. J. T." This last piece, written anonymously by Matz himself, reinforces the common language of the *Drood* discourse by encouraging historical analysis. "The Real P. J. T." retains the journal's inclusivity by feeding the historical interests of traditional Dickensians and scholars while also catering to the Droodians' desire to glean anything that may help with their theories. As

the *Drood* community continued to grow and Dickensians and Droodians became indistinguishable, Matz and the *Dickensian* attempted to keep correspondence open while protecting it from deteriorating into chaos.

The following year, 1907, proved to be the calm before the storm as the *Dickensian* ran only two short answers to *Drood* questions. But two provocative works were on the horizon: a new stage adaptation of the novel (and, subsequently, a new suggested ending) by J. Comyns Carr and, in February 1908, *The Keys to the Drood Mystery* by Edwin Charles (Charles E. Grisby).⁵² Carr's adaptation would stage *Drood* as a melodrama, a distinct gesture toward fandom and entertainment, while Charles's *Keys* would reach in the opposite direction with literary allusions to *Macbeth*. These works represent a pattern in *Drood* commentary during this period wherein a move to appeal to the lay reader would be countered by a move to appeal to the professional or academic (and vice versa). Together, these two trends threatened to upset the balance of the *Drood* community. The *Dickensian*'s tone suggests that the new stage production and publication prompted an unwieldy amount of commentary. The type of curating that Matz had done prior to 1908 appears to have been too overwhelming to continue. The *Dickensian* would publish five pieces of Droodiana that year and then establish a moratorium. In calling for a ceasefire in April, the editor's note expresses exasperation: "When we published Mr. Cuming Walters's article on *Edwin Drood* in our March issue, we mentally decided that it should be the last contribution to our pages on the subject for some time to come. Interesting and alluring as the subject is, we felt that it had been sufficiently well debated, and that perhaps many of our readers might be getting a little tired of the discussion"; Matz continues that the journal "beg[s] to give notice 'that this correspondence must now cease' for the present rate."⁵³ The journal's reputation was tied to this decision: at a time when the fellowship was essentially trying to convince the literary elite of Dickens's worth, the *Dickensian* could not afford to let its pages devolve into a fruitless discussion of his unfinished mystery. But the journal could not just ignore *Drood* commentary either, even if it was below the caliber that Matz wanted to promote; the moratorium appears to have been the compromise.

More subtly, however, the moratorium functioned as a reboot. While announcing a pause in the debate, the April 1908 issue featured several pieces on *Drood* all at once, including a piece by Walters that considers the endings suggested by Carr's adaptation and Charles's book. Once again, Matz attempts to guide readers by carefully choosing the commentary he considers "most important."⁵⁴ In firing off a final round of Droodiana in the same breath as calling for the commentary to stop, Matz seems more determined to remind the *Drood* community of the rules of discourse

than to discourage debate; it is a timeout rather than an end to the game. Further, by juxtaposing other correspondents' commentary with that of scholars such as Walters, Matz signals the *Dickensian's* commitment to maintaining an inclusive space for discussion. Feeding Droodians a final bucketful of commentary as an apparent wrap-up, he also leaves the door open for lay readers and amateur sleuths in the future.

It is worth pausing to note the contrast here between the *Dickensian* and other publications in terms of space devoted to Droodiana. The *Boston Evening Transcript* tied the journal in 1908 with five *Drood* articles. Only six other publications ran pieces about the mystery in that year, with only one article each: the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Bookman* (a special issue dedicated to *Drood*), *Manchester City News*, the *Bystander*, the *Morning Post*, and a publication entitled *P. T. O.* The *Dickensian* was essentially the only publication providing space for the *Drood* discourse to thrive at this time. As Orford emphasizes, the journal afforded Droodians a place to exchange ideas "beyond the limitations of the newspaper letters pages."⁵⁵ This was a mutually beneficial relationship: although (or perhaps because) many of the *Dickensian's* commentators appeared to ignore academic opinion of Dickens, they succeeded in bringing attention to *Drood* and helped to untangle a mystery that Matz and others in the fellowship were interested in solving despite themselves. The journal did not want to completely lose the discussions that this unorthodox community sparked. A cult classic had been born.

Maintaining Balance: 1911–15

The moratorium on the *Drood* debate held for two years until a new player appeared who would change the field of Droodiana. In 1911 Henry Jackson published his own theories in *About Edwin Drood*. A Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, Jackson performed a close reading of the *Drood* manuscript to unearth clues missed by his predecessors, a tactic that proved too tantalizing to ignore.⁵⁶ His credentials and persuasive analysis ushered in a new era; while this did not gain Dickens entry into the literary canon, it did transform the study of Droodiana from the guilty pleasure of a few scholars into an acceptable academic hobby seemingly overnight.

Initially, the *Dickensian* did not allow academic overtones to overwhelm the common language it had fostered. Several essays by Walters indicated that readers were allowed to indulge in giddiness while engaging in the debate. For example, in his playful review of Jackson's book, Walters writes, "I found myself mentioned in the preface and on the last page, and this being so, I was in courtesy bound to read the book."⁵⁷ Jackson agrees with his notion that Datchery is Helena Landless, and Walters registers

approval by declaring, “I am a modest man, but I think [Henry Jackson] is right when he says he thinks I am right.”⁵⁸ The journal also gives Walters space to become champion of the quirky mix of professionals, lay readers, and academics who make up Droodians: when a letter writer complains about the *Drood* controversy and asks the *Dickensian* to “drop it,” Walters responds, “If [the letter writer] will arrange, as I feel he can, that no more books shall ever be written on this subject, that no more editions of *Drood* shall be published, that no more correspondents shall discuss it, that no one shall ask a question about it, that no further reviews shall appear, that no human shall exercise itself over this literary problem, and that Mr. Lang, Mr. Shorter, Mr. Chesterton and Professor Jackson shall be compelled to take a vow of eternal silence—then I, on my part, will ‘drop it.’”⁵⁹

In other words, the *Dickensian* used Jackson’s entry into the debate to expand its Droodian community. While Walters’s framing of the phenomenon as a “literary problem” rather than a mere mystery situates Droodiana in the realm of academia, his impish tone simultaneously reinforces Droodian discourse as free of jargon and vested in accessibility. To reinforce this inclusivity, Matz compiled and published a second, more comprehensive bibliography of Droodiana in the same issue. This not only reminded the usual correspondents of the common language that the community had created but also helped new readers get up to speed. Though the beginning of 1912 saw little *Drood* commentary in the *Dickensian*—this was Dickens’s centenary year and the first few issues were devoted to the February events—the journal managed to capitalize on Jackson’s entry into *Drood* studies without alienating the lay readers who largely spawned the debate.

As the *Drood* phenomenon successfully breached the academic sphere, however, the scholarly set threatened to overwhelm traditional Droodians. In April the *Dickensian* opened by asking, “Are we to have another ‘Drood’ controversy?”; it then gave notice of new theories coming out as well as a series of letters in the *Eye Witness* between Walters and “K” (Cecil Chesterton, the periodical’s editor).⁶⁰ After Andrew Lang’s death in July, the *Dickensian* published his private correspondence with Walters over *Drood* from 1905. This was not only a tribute to a favorite Droodian but also a gesture toward the journal’s academic leanings. A new book, *The Problem of Edwin Drood* by W. Robertson Nicoll, was also published this year, featuring another close reading of the manuscript and the inclusion of some deleted passages. All of these commentaries appear to be similar in caliber to previous entries—musings back and forth on the familiar topics of Drood’s fate and Datchery’s identity—but the debate had unmistakably shifted to the academic. The acafan infusion continued into 1913 as the interest of academics like Cecil Chesterton and Professor

Jackson encouraged new scholars to come forward with their theories. The Dickens Fellowship and, by extension, the *Dickensian* would parlay this momentum into a mock trial of John Jasper in January 1914.

Like the journal that spawned it, the trial attempted to mediate the three worlds of the professional, the lay reader, and the academic. Presented in the format with which everyone was familiar (as opposed to an academic lecture) but stocked with literary celebrities, the trial was not conceived as a sensational stunt but rather as an opportunity for “legitimate literary debate.”⁶¹ No one would be able to hide behind pseudonyms here. J. Cuming Walters was naturally chosen to represent the prosecution, and Cecil Chesterton was chosen to represent the defense. G. K. Chesterton agreed to preside over the case as judge, and George Bernard Shaw was tapped as foreman of the jury. Specific rules were set in place; for instance, characters could not make statements outside of what is contained in the novel. And, as in a regular criminal trial, the prosecution and defense spent weeks preparing their cases. The trial, then, functioned as a quasi-academic symposium to which the public was also invited.

In some respects, the trial succeeded in expanding the *Drood* phenomenon beyond the pages of the *Dickensian*. In this brief period, Droodians were given a physical space in which to gather. The event brought considerable attention to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as well as the project of the Dickens Fellowship and the *Dickensian*. “It was excellent,” one writer raved the following month, “never has a more delightful function taken place under the auspices of the Dickens Fellowship; rarely has a greater literary treat been enjoyed in London.”⁶² The correspondent for the journal can be forgiven for the biased picture he paints, but the publicity garnered by the trial was very real. Over twenty other periodicals would cover the trial, leading the *Dickensian* to crow, “It is not the custom of ‘The Morning Post,’ for instance, to give three-column reports, with question and answer, of burlesque trials, or of the ‘Daily Telegraph’ to publish leading articles on such subjects.”⁶³ The trial not only succeeded in bringing professionals, lay readers, and academics together in person to discuss a work once considered inconsequential, but it also allowed the Dickens industry to colonize yet another form of media, arguably causing *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to enter the consciousness of many non-Dickensians for the first time.

The trial also highlighted the limits of the inclusivity that the *Dickensian* had been cultivating, however. The more literary-minded observers were less than enthused with the outcome. The defense ended up breaking some of the stipulations agreed upon in advance, much to Walters’s frustration, and the entire event risked becoming a mockery when Shaw announced, without meeting with his jury, that they had decided on a verdict of

“manslaughter” because there was no body.⁶⁴ As Walters observed, “In literary controversy we are bound to keep to well-established rules; but it seems that in a Trial there are no rules at all, and the result is chaos.”⁶⁵ Professionals and lay readers also appeared to be equally disappointed; most of the commentary about the trial, both in the *Dickensian* and elsewhere, unfortunately reflected Walters’s disappointment. In trying to please everyone, the trial failed to please anyone.⁶⁶

Modern interpretations of the trial tend to represent it as a comical marker of a more innocent and naïve time in literary criticism. But this perspective fails to appreciate the value of the undertaking. The fellowship attempted to construct an event that would unite Dickens fans from various backgrounds and solve a burning mystery. While it did not please everyone or come close to solving the mystery, it did bring attention to a work that had been largely forgotten by the general public. The outcome of the trial, then, is perhaps moot: what is impressive is that it occurred at all.

Drood fever continued for the rest of the year, powered by the literary (Montagu Saunders’s *The Mystery in the Drood Family*) and the more speculative (Walter E. Crisp’s conclusion in which Helena telepathically witnesses Edwin’s murder). The *Dickensian* continued to provide space for Droodiana, but Walters was only half joking in his review of Saunders’s book when he wrote, “I ought never to have started those ‘Clues.’ . . . I realise now that it was an awful mistake for which I must pay a deserved penalty.”⁶⁷ Four feverish years after lifting the first moratorium, the *Dickensian* grew weary once more. The April 1915 issue stated tersely, “We cannot publish any more letters on the Drood question for the present,” and after that the discussion again fell silent.⁶⁸ As goes the *Dickensian*, so go other periodicals: only a handful of *Drood* letters would be published in 1915. The onset of the First World War likely played a major role in this decision; after nine months of trench warfare, conversations about Dickens’s last tale may have seemed insignificant in comparison. In July the *Dickensian* began publishing a series of articles about war and peace written by Dickens, which extended over several issues.

But Walters’s allusion to the breaking of rules in his frustration with the trial also pointed to a breakdown in the common language established by the *Dickensian*, a breakdown from which the *Drood* phenomenon would never fully recover. This breakdown seems to have stemmed from the influx of academics. While Walters accuses individuals of failing to follow the “well-established rules” of literary debate, it was really their failure to adhere to the common Droodian discourse set by the *Dickensian*.⁶⁹ When *Drood* shifted from being a cult classic to a topic of wide academic discussion, the delicate balance of the community was disrupted: lay readers who wanted to celebrate the mystery of *Drood* were drowned out by schol-

ars who wanted to foreground literary debate and a handful of insincere individuals, like Shaw, who were merely posing as Droodians and viewed interest in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as a comical fad. The common language of discourse established by Droodians within the *Dickensian's* pages became badly impaired as a result. To its credit, the *Dickensian* continued to encourage an inclusive community despite this setback. *Drood* criticism would ramp up again after the war, and the *Dickensian* would find itself imposing a third moratorium on commentary in 1928.⁷⁰ But speculation about the novel would never reach the proportions it had during the years between 1905 and 1915, and the *Drood* phenomenon would slowly fade over the years, extinguishing almost entirely when Dickens was finally ushered into the canon in the 1940s.⁷¹ The closer Dickens shifted to becoming a topic of scholarly study, the less attention was accorded to *Drood*, which became “the slightly embarrassing uncle, impossible to ignore but preferable not to acknowledge.”⁷² Professionals followed this academic trend, shifting their focus to Dickens's other works and leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to the lay readers and amateur sleuths. The moment when Dickensians and Droodians were the same had ended.

Conclusion

Reading Cox's bibliography of Droodiana against the commentary in the *Dickensian* demonstrates how the journal served as a mediator between fandom and scholarship in the early twentieth century. In the years between 1905 and 1915 we can see the journal making conscious choices to create an inclusive community of Droodians in which theories, not credentials, were most important. The decade is a snapshot of a moment when all types of readers were welcomed into the same space to engage in a common discourse. The *Dickensian* was responsible for cultivating this moment by encouraging and attempting to guide commentary into a more fruitful direction, even if the journal was not always sure which direction that was.

Through its inclusive efforts, the *Dickensian* helped build a body of criticism for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. If, as John argues, “academic opinion has lagged behind popular opinion and, further, that the seriousness with which the public has taken Dickens since his death has forced professional critics to take his work seriously,” then the *Dickensian* deserves a large chunk of the credit for promoting Dickens's unfinished work.⁷³ Arguably, the *Drood* phenomenon fostered by the *Dickensian* briefly accomplished for literary study what Dickens hoped to achieve with the novel by “submerging class differences beneath a sense of community.”⁷⁴ The *Drood* phenomenon, then, might be considered an analog for the kind of crowdsourcing or hive-mind work done today on social media

platforms. More importantly, it drew attention to a novel that likely would have remained an esoteric interest of scholars. While Orford argues that, during the golden decade, “the book’s merits were no longer to be found in its own pages but in the far greater volume of pages written by others trying to solve it,” interest in solving the mystery also kept *Drood* in the popular imagination long enough for it to eventually be considered on its own merits once Dickens became a worthy subject of scholarly study in the mid-twentieth century.⁷⁵ Malcolm Andrews credits lay readers for reminding scholars of the beauty of being lost in Dickens, while Ella Westland observes, “It is no accident that the two critics who made major contributions to Dickens’s fortunes—George Orwell in Britain and Edmund Wilson in the States—were positioned off-campus.”⁷⁶ The *Dickensian*’s editors recognized the diversity of its readers and capitalized on their energy and different perspectives, always mindful of keeping lay readers in the debate while also encouraging professionals and academics to join in the fun. Wilson has contended that “none of the more serious critics of Dickens have ever been able to take [*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*] seriously,” but he overlooks (or at the very least oversimplifies) the history of *Drood* commentary and also trivializes the role of diverse readerships in adding to our literary knowledge.⁷⁷

The *Drood* phenomenon began as a result of a perfect storm: an unfinished mystery by a well-loved author and a new journal dedicated to professionals, lay readers, and academics alike laid the groundwork for a successful collaboration. Jenkins asserts that “fandom originates in specific historical conditions”; the *Drood* phenomenon might present a roadmap for recreating the historical conditions of the golden decade.⁷⁸ What other forgotten or dismissed Victorian works might be saved by forming an imagined community of readers as the *Dickensian* did at the turn of the twentieth century? The explosion of social media and publishing platforms, along with the growth of digital literacy, presents us with opportunities to use crowdsourcing to generate canons of criticism for lost works. Using methods similar to those of an early twentieth-century periodical in resuscitating a nineteenth-century work, we can encourage inclusivity in literary debates between professionals, lay readers, and academics.

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NOTES

1. Waugh, *Hundred Years of Publishing*, 135.
2. Cox, *Charles Dickens’s “The Mystery of Edwin Drood,”* xv.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, xxi.

5. My analysis relies heavily on the editorial tone toward and placement of *Drood* commentary. As such, I consider references to *Drood* that in some cases were too brief to warrant an entry in Cox's bibliography but whose presence in the journal, as I will demonstrate, supported the *Dickensian's* efforts to foster an inclusive community by balancing what some might consider frivolous speculation with academic scholarship.
6. John, *Dickens and Mass Culture*, 15.
7. Small analyzes Dickens's public readings in depth in "Pulse of 124." For a convincing argument of how Dickens utilized serialization to create a democratic reading public, see Winter, *Pleasures of Memory*.
8. For more on posthumous editions of Dickens's novels, see Loutit, "Favour on the Million." For an official history of Chapman and Hall's publications of Dickens's work, see Waugh, *Hundred Years of Publishing*.
9. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 171.
10. Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations*, 195.
11. Ibid.
12. Winter, *Pleasures of Memory*, 283.
13. Westland, "Making of Dickens," 208.
14. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 172–73.
15. Williams, "Dickens Fellowship," 36.
16. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 198.
17. Matz, "Preface," 1.
18. Litvack, "*Dickensian*," 70.
19. Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 37.
20. See, for example, Litvack, "*Dickensian*"; Andrews, "I will live in the past"; and Westland, "Making of Dickens."
21. Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, 3.
22. Shattock, "Contexts and Conditions of Criticism," 34.
23. Andrews reports that this tension is particularly evident at the Dickens Fellowship Conference, in which lay readers interested in celebrating Dickens are frequently overwhelmed by literary scholars "pursu[ing] intricately theoretical lines of argument" ("I will live in the past," 206).
24. Litvack, "*Dickensian*," 73.
25. See Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1–31.
26. Connor, "Dead? Or Alive?," 88.
27. As I will demonstrate shortly, these moratoriums were enacted as a result of the breakdown of the common language for Droodians established by the *Dickensian*.
28. Cox, *Charles Dickens's "The Mystery of Edwin Drood"*, xv.
29. Dillane, "Avatars, Pseudonyms, and the Regulation of Affect," 337.
30. Small, "Pulse of 124," 266. Small suggests that Dickens did not entirely succeed in this venture, as these readings were often too expensive for working-class individuals. However, Dickens's selection of material that

would appeal to a broad audience, along with his insistence that even the cheap seats be decent, did, in Small's estimate, give audience members "the experience of being a unified public" (276).

31. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers*, 175.
32. Barnard, *Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens*, 135.
33. Waugh, *Hundred Years of Publishing*, 200, 142.
34. Brookes-Cross, "When Found—," 31–32.
35. Taunton emphasizes the role that letters to the editor played in "opening up the pages of the papers to the public to create a putatively free forum for debate" ("Letters/Correspondence," 359).
36. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 35.
37. Cox, *Charles Dickens's "The Mystery of Edwin Drood,"* 346.
38. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 33.
39. Proctor, *Watched by the Dead*, vi.
40. Orford describes Walters as "a constant presence in the letters pages" as he worked out his theories (*Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 38).
41. Wilson, *Wound and the Bow*, 76.
42. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 18. For a comprehensive discussion of the acafan, see Kustritz, Stein, and Ford, "Acafandom and Beyond," on Jenkins's blog.
43. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 36.
44. As Orford reminds us, Proctor initially corresponded under the pseudonym "Thomas Foster," (*Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 33). Shattock argues that the anonymity associated with literary reviews in nineteenth-century journals began to fade away in the 1860s, a move that coincided with the professionalization of literary journalists ("Contexts and Conditions of Criticism," 35).
45. Ley, "National Dickens Library," 267. Ley also engaged in the Drood debate through his contributions in the *Dickensian*. In this piece, a review of the National Dickens Library, he appears to take issue with those who do not display "genuine affection" in their *Drood* continuations and conclusions, lumping Lang's work in with Thomas Powers James's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood Complete* (1873), which James claimed was a transcription from Dickens's ghost (267).
46. As Jenkins explains in *Textual Poachers*, "Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons" (18).
47. Matz, "When Found—," December 1905, 309.
48. Walters, "'Edwin Drood': Continued," 238.
49. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 253.
50. Walters, "Drood and Datchery," 60.
51. Matz, "When Found—," January 1906, 1.
52. J. Comyns Carr's *John Jasper's Confession: A Drama in Four Acts* was performed in 1907 but never published.

53. Matz, "When Found—," April 1908, 87.
54. Ibid.
55. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 43.
56. Cox, *Charles Dickens's "The Mystery of Edwin Drood,"* xxiii, 292.
57. Walters, "Drood and Datchery," 61.
58. Ibid., 63.
59. Walters, "Drop It," 133.
60. Matz, "When Found—," April 1912, 87.
61. Ley, "Trial of John Jasper," 34.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 33.
64. Walters, "Drood Trial Reviewed," 43.
65. Ibid., 44.
66. As Orford describes it, the trial was "an evening too chaotic to please those who wanted a serious discussion, and too long-winded for those seeking light relief" (*Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 56).
67. Walters, "'Edwin Drood': Continued," 239.
68. Matz, "We Cannot Publish," 107. Notably, there is no mention of Droodiana in "When Found—" in this issue.
69. Walters, "Drood Trial Reviewed," 44.
70. Cox, *Charles Dickens's "The Mystery of Edwin Drood,"* xxvii.
71. Ibid., xxv.
72. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 73–74.
73. John, *Dickens and Mass Culture*, 24.
74. Ibid., 41. John argues that Dickens "envisaged the novel as a porous form imbibing popular cultural influences yet appealing to all sections of the populace" (39).
75. Orford, *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, lix.
76. Andrews, "I will live in the past," 211–12; Westland, "Making of Dickens," 210.
77. Wilson, *Wound and the Bow*, 69.
78. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 3.

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