

*What Draws Young Men Overseas?
Identifying the Impact of Overseas Business Experiences on
Young Men in Dickens's Life and Novels*

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Abstract

In this article, I focus on the impact of overseas business experiences on the young men in Dickens's life and fiction, and how their absence and return propel his novel plots. Dickens's lifetime (1812–70) parallels the expansion of the British Empire. I mention that Dickens's five sons obtained jobs overseas, and Dickens fully acknowledged the function of overseas territories as places where middle-class young men could find a profitable job and attain independence. I clarify that in his fiction, Dickens did not encourage young men to go overseas as much as in his own life. I highlight that in Dickens's novels, the decision to send young men overseas practically constitutes a means to punish and remove the rebellious and unwanted as overseas travel is unsafe, and overseas experiences do not always lead to worldly success. I argue that Dickens emphasized the pressure on young men to go overseas and their coming to maturity through overseas experiences. I demonstrate that young men's overseas business makes their durable absence persuasive, induces anxiety, tests the affection of their beloveds, and makes young men's ultimate return and reunion more impressive.

Keywords: Dickens, Dickens's Family, British Empire, Colonies, Overseas, Employment, Work

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the impact of overseas business experiences on young men in Dickens's life and his novels, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–44) and *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). Dickens's lifetime (1812–70) parallels the expansion of the British Empire. After losing the thirteen colonies in America in 1783, Britain recognized the need to make profit from other colonies (Collingham 148). In 1806–08, Britain's trade with South America yielded sufficient profit to maintain its economic and military power (Black, ch.4, 110). From 1806-14, Britain obtained Cape Town, the Caribbean Islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, Martinique, the French positions in St. Domingo, Guadeloupe, Reunion, Mauritius, the Dutch bases on the Molucca and Sulawesi and Aceh, Batavia, and Timor (Black, ch.4, 111). Black notes that in the nineteenth century, Britain "saw a marked expansion in the extent of the empire" and British Empire was considered exceptional by Britain itself and other countries (Black, ch.4, 107).

Reading his life and novels, we find that seeking jobs overseas was a default option for ordinary middle-class men. In his private life, Dickens strongly recommended that his sons go overseas. In his fiction *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son*, he similarly deems overseas countries as environments wherein young men should discipline and improve themselves by being away from hostile guardians and bosses, and thereby be welcomed by those who have denied them. Dickens makes use of their absence for a considerable length of time to make their ultimate return more impressive.

What motivated young men to go overseas?

My first argument is regarding young Victorian men's motive to go overseas and the technological development that enabled them to have travel safely. Here, I draw your attention to the younger sons of good families with landed estate. Rory Muir explains the process of inheritance in the second half of the eighteenth century. Generally, the eldest son would inherit the family house and estate. Younger sons needed to be independent and make enough money, without spoiling their social standing. The options were limited: the Church, law, medicine, banking, or any other trade deemed decent, joining the navy or army, going to colonies, or becoming government officers (viii-iv). These circumstances were more or less the same in Dickens's lifetime.

Such employment options mostly involved overseas activities. I would like to list out notable examples. The Church entailed missionary work in colonies. In 1795, the London Missionary Society was founded. From this year to 1895, they sent missionaries to Africa, China, India, Madagascar, Polynesia, and the West Indies to propagate Christianity (Lovett, Vols. 1-2). In law and medicine, some did overseas studies and training. A Scottish physician Robert Whytt (1714–66), who was known for studies on diseases of the nervous systems, studied in Paris and Leyden, and pursued MD at Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne (Stronach). In trade, importing from and exporting overseas was profitable, of which the most notable example was the East India Company. Thackeray's parents related to the Company and Thackeray was born in India. In the navy and army, going to overseas battle fields was inevitable, as seen in the cases of Nelson and Wellington. Some government officers resided in colonies and controlled the locals. In 1922–27, George Orwell worked as a police officer in Burma, which was a province of British India. These cases are the pioneers of today's globalization.

Young men's activeness in working overseas was aided by the improvement of land transportation and shipbuilding technologies (Moore 7). James Watt's improved steam engine was used to power heavy machines and applied to ship engines after further improvements. Iron and coal-mining industries expanded; resultantly, larger ships could be built, and more energy resources were available. From the 1840s, screw propellers began to replace paddle wheels (Jones, Elwell 65-69, Knight 66-69). By the 1870s, the British navy defeated France, Dutch, and Spain; thus, there was less danger of British ships being attacked (Collingham 164). Voyages became faster, cheaper, and safer owing to these achievements. The action radius of British people was expanded with the development of the British Empire and transportation means.

The overseas experiences of Dickens's sons

Next, I explain the lives and careers of Dickens's seven sons to prove Dickens's awareness regarding overseas countries where his sons could be independent and respectable. The lives and careers of Dickens's sons agreed with those his contemporaries deemed gentlemanlike and all had overseas experience. Except the eldest Charley (1837–96), they were educated in France because Dickens wanted them to learn French and tuition fee was cheaper than in Britain. Except the second youngest Henry (1849–1933), the rest went overseas to make a living.

The eldest, Charley, was educated at Eton and Germany. After working for a London financial company Barings, he went to Hong Kong in 1861 to be a tea trader, but his tea business did not succeed. After further failing in his paper-mill business and going bankrupt, he became the editor of *All the Year Round* and published *Dickens Dictionary* in 1879 (Mark Charles Dickens 7, Gottlieb 303-98, 1566). He appeared to have inherited Dickens's passion for publishing.

The second son, Walter (1841–63), entered the presidency army of the East India Company. Two months prior to his departure to India on 20 July 1857, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 had broken out in Meerut, northwest of Delhi, and spread nationwide. As soon as Walter arrived in India, he was involved in fights. He lost a chance for promotion because of his habitual debt. He died at the age of 22, never returning to Britain. Robert Gottlieb cites debt and Dickens's anger as reasons for his early death (Mark Charles Dickens 6, Gottlieb 861-928).

The third son, Francis (1844–86), first wanted to be a doctor, then worked for *All the Year Round*. Both did not suit him, and Dickens found a post for him in the Bengal Mounted Police. In 1871, he returned to Britain for inheritance. He wasted his money and did not return to India again. Dickens's remaining family painstakingly appointed him in the North-West Mounted Police, Canada. He was not adept at his job, but was promoted to inspector (Mark Charles Dickens 6, Gottlieb 971-87, 1975-2004).

The fourth son, Alfred (1845–1912), failed to enter the army, resulting in Dickens considering medicine and trade as options for him, but this plan failed again. Dickens thought going overseas was good for Alfred and decided to send him to Australia because he was interested in this country. Alfred did sheep farming and later established a stock company with his youngest brother Edward. Initially, his business went well, but after 1874, it started deteriorating. In the 1890s, Australia was hit by depression. To supplement his income, Alfred began lecture tours in Australia, and subsequently Britain and the US, with much success (Mark Charles Dickens 8, Gottlieb 1021-1065, 2147-2205). As was the case with

Dickens's other sons, Alfred too lacked financial wisdom in his youth. However, he shared Dickens's conversational and persuasive talents and succeeded in getting back on his feet.

The fifth son, Sydney (1847–72), decided to join the Navy at the age of eight, and realized this wish. Dickens was particularly fond of Sydney and had high expectations from him. Sydney was satisfactorily promoted, making his father proud. However, as years passed, Sydney's accrued debts, and the infuriated Dickens paid them off. (Mark Charles Dickens 6, Gottlieb 1085-1165, 2251-58).

The sixth son, Henry (1849–1933) was deemed as the most successful of Dickens's sons. Unlike his elder brothers, he had no interest in the military or the Indian Civil Service. He decided to study at Cambridge and enter the law. Dickens did not immediately agree with Henry's decision and consulted with teachers and friends who guaranteed Henry's qualities and Dickens finally agreed to send him to university. His academic achievements were remarkable. He won a scholarship of 50 pounds and pleased Dickens. In 1872, he obtained a degree in law and started his career. In 1892, he was appointed in the Queen's Council and in 1899 he became a bencher of the Inner Temple. In 1907, he went to Jamaica on business. In 1917, he became the Common Sergeant of London and in 1922, he was knighted (Mark Charles Dickens 8-9, 1351-1465, 2268-2412). Among Dickens's sons, only Henry inherited Dickens's strengths: hard work, self-confidence, and the ability to support family members.

The last son, Edward (1852–1902) did not follow Henry's success. Edward was Dickens's favorite son, but he was shy and lacked motivation and the ability to work hard. Not being happy with this, Dickens decided to send him to Australia to discipline him, like Alfred. Edward had difficulty in settling in Australia. He got involved in farming and stock business, but his commercial success did not continue for long. He had an interest in politics and in 1889, he became an MP in New South Wales. After he was defeated in the election, he became a land inspector in the Moree Land District. Later, he cut ties with his siblings owing to his financial difficulties (Mark Charles Dickens 7, 1351-1465, 2440-2528). The relationship between Dickens and Edward is comparable to that between Dombey and Paul because both expected too much of their sons and sent them to a harsh environment, resulting in their unhappiness.

Observing the life and career of Dickens's seven sons, we find that except the Church, they engaged in or tried jobs preferred by mid-Victorian middle-class families and Dickens. Possibly from his experience, he did not esteem higher education as highly as his fellow middle-class men and he considered his sons' early independence most significant. He wrote to Henry, "You know how hard I worked for what I get, and I think you know that I never had money help from any human creature after I was a child. You know that you are one of many heavy charges on me, I trust to your so exercising your abilities and improving advantages of your past expensive education, as to diminish *this* charge" (italics original, 15 Oct 1868). His brightest son Henry did not go to India as Dickens expected. Instead, he went to Cambridge and succeeded without relying much on Dickens. He could survive in a competitive Victorian Britain on his own. Like Dickens, Henry had a large family and the support of his siblings, which should have been his eldest brother Charley's duty. The next best is Alfred and then Charley. They made use of Dickens's name for their business and tried to overcome financial difficulties. The last is Edward. The life and career of Dickens's sons indicate that overseas countries are not ideal, and the ordinary people remain ordinary wherever they go. Going overseas does not necessarily lead to happiness.

Martin Chuzzlewit's failed attempt to make a fortune in the US

Next, I would like to read Martin Chuzzlewit's venture in the US. Martin's travel to the US was Dickens's ad hoc idea to boost the bad sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. P. N. Furbank opines, "the American part of the novel remains rather loosely tied to the rest" (23) and "the American chapters strikes us generally thinner and more extravagant than the rest of the world" (25). Martin's decision to go to the US is imprudent and reckless. After running away from home, he does nothing useful to make a living, except selling what he has at pawnbroker shops and putting situation-wanted advertisements in newspapers. His job hunting on the ship fails because his gentlemanlike dresses and mannerisms work against him. Later, he says to Mary that there is no possibility of his success in Britain and menial labor such as a coachman and a porter is unbearable, thus he is going to America. Unlike Dickens, Martin is used to being given whatever he wants and aspires to get rich without hard work. Goldie Morgentaler regards Martin's selfishness as nothing serious (351), but in most parts of the text, Martin is nasty and conceited, with a groundless sense of superiority.

In the US plot, Martin is constantly compared with Mark Tapley and this comparison shows Martin's immaturity and shortcomings. For instance, on the way to the US, Martin is complaining of boarding the steerage and looks down on other passengers although he is as poor as them. On the other hand, Mark overcomes sea sickness, gets along with, and takes care of other passengers, and makes a long journey less painful. Martin is obsessed with his class consciousness, while he is good at adapting to any circumstance. He is happy to seek favors, but Martin considers it shameful. While staying in the US, Martin's snobbishness remains unchanged.

The narrator sharply condemns Martin's arrogance and bragging:

Poor Martin! Forever building castles in the air. Forever, in his very selfishness, forgetful of all but his own teeming hopes and sanguine plans. Swelling, at that instant, with the consciousness of patronizing and most munificently rewarding Mark! (ch.21, 416)

Before Martin, excited with the expectations for going to Eden, a group of miserable immigrants appear:

Farmers who had never seen a plough; woodmen who had never used an axe; builders who could not make a box; cast out of their own land, with not a hand to aid them: newly come into an unknown world, children in helplessness, but men in wants--with younger children at their backs, to live or die as it might happen! (ch.22, 437).

Grace Moore says that this scene highlights the problem of unskilled immigrants (9). Martin looks down on them, but he is no different from them. They foreshadow the forthcoming fate of Martin.

It is unsurprising that Martin is conned because those who are vain and think of making an easy fortune are easily duped. Barren landscapes appear one after another as if depicting the ugliness of Martin's actions:

As they proceeded further on their track, and came more and more towards their journey's end, the monotonous desolation of the scene increased to that degree, that

for any redeeming feature it presented to their eyes, they might have entered, in the body, on the grim domains of Giant Despair. A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burnt them up; where fatal maladies, seeking whom they might infect, came forth at night in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water, hunted them like spectres until day; where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved. (ch.23, 442)

Martin's falling a victim to fraud and subsequent illness are punishments for his disobedience and imprudence. The wasteland of Eden indicates the emptiness of his plan.

The failure of Martin's attempt to make a fortune in the US pains him, but his travel to the US presents an opportunity to reform himself. While being sick in bed and then nursing Mark, Martin realizes and regrets his faults. He is tamed and returns to Britain. However, his improvement ends at this point. After arriving in Britain, he does nothing but wait for old Martin's forgiveness although he says to Tom that he would do anything to make a living. Old Martin's sudden change and reconciliation with Martin seem to be the return of the prodigal son. Yet, Dickens fails to describe Martin's growth through difficulties as Martin is constantly dependent on somebody else.

Walter Gay as Dickensian Whittington

Finally, I would like to analyze the impact of overseas experience in *Dombey and Son*. In chapter 4, the hero Walter Gay excitingly talks about brave sailors and their adventures in stormy weather. Walter is compared to Dick Whittington, and it is hinted that Walter will go to sea, marry his master's daughter Florence Dombey, and live happily ever after. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens adds elements of a folklore.

However, Walter's daily life is ordinary, boring, and far from being adventurous. He is a junior clerk in Dombey's company. Unlike Martin, Walter has no wealthy relatives and desperately needs to work and make a living. His workplace is unromantic, located amidst the city, surrounded by large buildings and walls, and full of greedy people.

Raymond Williams states that Dickens was the first English novelist to describe the modern city (21). Williams is correct because the opening of chapter 4 in *Dombey and Son* captures the noises and restlessness of London City:

Though the offices of Dombey and Son were within the liberties of the City of London, and within earshot of Bow Bells when their clanging was not drowned by the uproar in the streets, there were hints of adventurous and romantic stories to be observed in some of the adjacent objects. Gog and Magog held their state within ten minutes' walk; the Royal Exchange was nearby; the Bank of England, with its vaults of gold and silver "down among the dead men" underground, was their magnificent neighbor. Just round the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets, with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. Anywhere in the

immediate vicinity there might be seen pictures of ships speeding away at full sail to all parts of the world; outfitting warehouses ready to pack off anybody anywhere, fully equipped in half an hour; and little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop doors of nautical instrument-makers in taking observations of the hackney carriages. (ch.4, 87-88)

In this scene, *Dombey and Son* is located near the London City Hall, the Bank of England, the Royal Exchange, and the East India Company. These organizations are the core of British economy; Dombey's pride in his own existence and business makes sense. Sol Gills's old-fashioned shop, where Walter lives, is located near Dombey's office. This mapping indicates that the mobility of the British economy; Dombey's firm can decline, and Sol Gills and Walter can make a fortune.

Despite their neighboring relationship, in the beginning of *Dombey and Son*, there is a huge gap in the social standings and financial circumstances of the Dombey and Gills households. Gills is nearly bankrupt from debt and limited customers. He is too old to do something to rebuild the shop. He considers Walter's working for Dombey's company honorable and expects him to be promoted and marry Florence: "Be diligent, try to like it, my dear boy, work for a steady independence, and be happy" (ch.4, 94). However, Walter knows his place well and always cowers before Dombey. When Walter asks Dombey to lend money to pay off Gills's debt, Dombey scorns Walter and Gills in front of Florence and Paul. Paul is happy to give Walter money, but Dombey forces Paul to lend money to Walter and demands Walter's gratitude. Brigid Lowe mentions that in *Dombey and Son*, "the masculine world of money and power" and "the feminine world of human need, connection, love" exist (362). Dombey portrays the reality of masculine aspects of modern Britain: those without money and power are exploited.

Walter's transfer to the Barbados branch is quite similar to those of today's office workers because it is demanded by the company and he has to obey it even though he is not inclined to. The post offered to Walter is not promising and he understands it is demotion owing to the dislike Dombey harbors for him. Gills and Captain Cuttle are old and poor, therefore unlike Martin, he cannot depend on them. He wants to believe his going to Barbados is good for his guardians and they also wish to believe Walter is sure to succeed. Dombey dislikes Florence's interest in Walter, and takes advantage of the need to fill up a vacancy:

When Mr. Dombey had looked at him, and told him he was young, and that his uncle's circumstances were not good, there had been an expression of disdain in his face; a contemptuous and disparaging assumption that he would be quite content to live idly on a reduced old man, which stung the boy's generous soul. (ch.15, 277)

In Walter's demotion, Dickens exhibits the contrast of the unfeeling Dombey and Walter's desperate need to cling to the undesirable job to make a living.

What Walter does after leaving Britain is limitedly explained. Instead, the reactions of Walter's circle after the disappearance of the ship to Barbados are told. For instance, Dickens describes the anxiety, despair, and loneliness of Florence in details:

Of Walter she thought often. Ah! how often, when the night was gloomy, and the wind was blowing round the house! But hope was strong in her breast. It is so difficult for the young and ardent, even with such experience as hers, to imagine youth and

ardour quenched like a weak flame, and the bright day of life merging into night, at noon, that hope was strong yet. Her tears fell frequently for Walter's sufferings; but rarely for his supposed death, and never long. (ch.28, 478)

All she can do is wait for him in a loveless household despite little hope of his return. For instance, this passage appears thrice in chapter 23.

Florence lived alone in the great dreary house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone; and the blank walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone. (ch.23, 393, 394-95, 398)

Mary Armstrong mentions, "Florence herself is the perfect Victorian female; beautiful to the point of otherworldliness, selfless to the point of invisibility" (282). But, her "perfection" requires much sacrifice; she is confined in isolation and her beauty and youth are wasted. Her powerlessness shows Victorian middle-class women's inability to be independent, while men have lots of options.

Florence's running away from home and eloping are her first acts of disobedience to Dombey. Armstrong says, "She is not the representation of desire so much as she is the expectation of desire" (282), but she acts based on her desire and passion, thus she is partly a new woman. After she runs away from home, the difficulties Florence and Walter have been suffering from are solved quickly. First, Walter returns safely to Florence. Wendy Parkins says, "Walter Gay's shipwreck is ultimately a liberating opportunity to create a new future for himself, freed from his dependent status as an exploited employee of the House of Dombey" (22). On returning to Britain, Walter is a part-time sailor and barely makes ends meet. However, after marrying Florence, Walter is promoted to a supercargo of a China trader. Dombey rejects Florence, on the other hand, Walter's social standing is improved by adding Florence to his workplace. This is allowed in life at sea, far away from the male-centered Britain.

After returning to Britain, the happiness of Florence and Walter continues. Walter is further promoted and does not need to sail to China any more. Florence does not need to wait for his return with fear and anxiety. At the beginning of the marriage, both are penniless and have nobody to depend on except themselves. She prepares well for poverty and he makes a living without depending on her dowry. She says:

Aye! but, Walter, you can never feel it as I do. I am so proud of you! It makes my heart swell with such delight to know that those who speak of you must say you married a poor disowned girl, who had taken shelter here; who had no other home, no other friends; who had nothing---nothing! Oh, Walter, if I could have brought you millions, I never could have been so happy for your sake, as I am! (ch.56, 885)

Unlike Whittington, Walter does not inherit Dombey's business. Instead, by his transfer to Barbados and China, Dickens creates a different form of marriage from those of his contemporaries.

Conclusion

Reading the overseas experience of Dickens's sons, Martin, and Walter, we understand that overseas employment could be both promising and risky. Dickens deems employment in Britain better when a man is capable and has connections, and overseas employment as the second-best option. As seen in the cases of some of Dickens's sons, Martin and Walter, colonies and ex-colonies were dumping grounds of the unwanted. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens focuses on the risk of going overseas by relying on overtly optimistic prospects. In *Dombey and Son*, by Walter's venture and success, Dickens writes of the British dream which the humble and obscure cannot realize in Britain. Furthermore, Walter's absence induces anxiety in Florence, and tests her patience and love. While waiting for Walter's return, Florence increasingly becomes strong-minded. Therefore, Walter's return and their reunion are impressive.

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