

To Australia and back. The metaphor of return in
Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*
and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

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Last sea-thing dredged by sailor
Time from Space,
Are you a drift Sargasso,
where the West
In halcyon calm rebuilds
her fatal nest?
Or Delos of a coming
Sun-God's race?
Are you for Light, and trimmed,
with oil in place,
Or but a will o' Wisp
on marshy quest?
A new demesne for Mammon
to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden
'neath your face?

Bernard O'Dowd, 'Australia', 12 May 1900
(my italics. Quoted in John Ritchie, *Australia as once we
were* 1975: 167)

Bernard O'Dowd's poem suggests a range of possible views of Australia. In this article I argue that a change in how the British Empire was perceived during the nineteenth century as a consequence of increased knowledge about the colonies is intimately connected with the possibility of return to the mother country. I concentrate on two major authors, Dickens and Hardy, focusing on *The Personal History of David*

Copperfield (published between 1849 and 1850; hereafter referred to as *David Copperfield*), *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895-6). These three novels illustrate a shift in attitude to the possibility and advisability of return from Australia. I pose the question: 'Why do Dickens' characters remain in Australia, or try to return and fail, while Hardy's succeed and even prosper back in England?'

I identify three levels of knowledge about the Empire – and Australia in particular – and show how these are reflected in the three novels. In the first of the novels, *David Copperfield*, Dickens reflects the lack of knowledge of many of his contemporaries. The novel offers an idealised picture of the colonies, and there is no thought of the characters returning. In the second novel, *Great Expectations*, Australia is still steeped in mystery, and return – while possible – is doomed to failure. By the 1890s and the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, knowledge of the empire based on oral and written accounts of visitors and settlers becomes widely available and return to the mother country is a viable and sometimes advisable option.

Neither Dickens nor Hardy was particularly knowledgeable about the Empire. As I hope to show, Dickens was particularly skilful in disguising his ignorance with the aid of a variety of narrative techniques. Dickens' and Hardy's novels reflect the level of knowledge of the colonies current in the mid- and late- nineteenth century. In *Oliver Twist*, begun in 1837, there is mention of a 'distant part of the New World', a fitting place for Monks to squander his money in and where he can die a lonely death in prison. Nothing is said about the conditions under which he lives, he is simply 'far from home' (ch. 53). In *Dombey and Son*, published between 1846 and 1848, Walter Gay is sent to the West Indies, shipwrecked, and assumed drowned. The Empire is a place in which people disappear. By Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Arabella is clearly able to account for why she and her family have returned to England. The idealised picture of the Empire current until the 1880s gradually gives way to a more balanced and realistic one – a picture which becomes incorporated into the literature of the period.

My argument is based on a particular view of human knowledge which has much in common with the views of Satya P. Mohanty:

Human knowledge is a socially constructed knowledge of the real world; the world exists as an analyzable causal structure, and it shapes our knowledge of it. The world exists independently of our knowledge of it; it is not paradigm specific. But significant portions of it, namely, the social and cultural aspects of it, including much of the natural world, are also causally affected by our actions, our theories, and our knowledge-gathering procedures: we do not only 'discover' reality; we 'make' it as well (1997: 193).

Reading has a performative function. The method of publication of the three novels discussed here encouraged readers to create pictures of their own: the regular instalments (*Great Expectations* was published weekly and *David Copperfield* and *Jude the Obscure* on a monthly basis) were not only so designed that they stimulated curiosity and suspense – what Douglas Brooks-Davies describes as 'the best-seller technique of mystification' (1989: 9) – they also made it possible for readers to write to the author and thereby influence the story.

As Edwin Whipple, one of the early reviewers of *Great Expectations* noted, people read the novel

as we have read all Mr Dickens's previous works, as it appeared in instalments, and can testify to the felicity with which expectation was excited and prolonged, and to the series of surprises which accompanied the unfolding of the plot of the story (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1861. Qtd. in Brooks-Davies 1989: 9).

The fact that instalments were often read aloud to small groups ensured that episodes were discussed from a variety of perspectives and by people of different social classes and backgrounds, including those unable to read. As Rosemarie C. Sultan writes, 'Dickens was read by just about everyone, from the bottom of society to the top.'¹ The

¹ See the section 'Readership: literacy and the reading public' in *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* ed. by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 487-89. Sultan argues that 'Thackeray might have possessed more cachet amongst the upper classes, and there may have been sensation novels that sold more copies amongst the working classes, but no other writer commanded so widely defined and so large a general readership' (488).

weekly/monthly instalments formed an integral part of social life inside and outside the family. Truth and fiction became interwoven as readers followed the fortunes of such colourful characters as the Micawbers or Arabella. As one anonymous writer for *Fraser's Magazine* (1850) put it, 'Probably there is no single individual who, during the last fourteen years, has occupied so large a space in the thoughts of English folk as Charles Dickens.'² The anonymous reviewer for *Harper's Weekly* made a similar observation when s/he pointed to the eagerness with which Hardy's final novel was awaited:

a new novel from Thomas Hardy is as eagerly awaited as one from George Eliot used to be, though with a more popular expectation than was awakened by this most thoughtful woman after she had left the field of common life so humorously and tragically represented in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* (8 December 1894. Review of *Jude the Obscure*. Qtd. in Laurence Lerner and John Holmstrom 1968, 104).

To understand why Dickens and Hardy portrayed the possibility of return from Australia differently it is necessary to understand how knowledge of the colonies changed during the course of the nineteenth century. Dickens was a great advocate of emigration as a means of escaping poverty or social disgrace³ and making a new start. He actively supported Caroline Chisholm, for example, in her efforts to enable single young women to emigrate to Australia and find useful employment,⁴ thereby avoiding prostitution (we immediately think of Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield*). Dickens also encouraged his own sons to emigrate to Australia.

² 'Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*,' *Fraser's Magazine* December 1850, xlii, 698-710. Reprinted in Philip Collins (ed.), *Charles Dickens. The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 243.

³ See, for example, 'Recycling the Poor and Fallen: Emigration Politics and the Narrative Resolutions of *Mary Barton* and *David Copperfield*' in Rita S. Krandsis, *Imperial Objects. Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and the Unauthorized Imperial Experience* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 43-63.

⁴ See, for example, Russel Ward, *Australia since the coming of man* (Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia, 1987), 94.

Unlike Dickens, Hardy was not personally involved in immigration issues. While there is no evidence in his letters, disguised autobiography or non-fictional publications to suggest that he had a special interest in, or knowledge about the Empire, we should nevertheless bear in mind that *Jude the Obscure* was written at a time when nearly one quarter of the world had been colonised, Rudyard Kipling had taken the literary public of London by storm with his Indian tales, G.A. Henty's books were recommended reading for children, Rider Haggard had become almost as popular as Dickens himself, Joseph Conrad had left the merchant navy to record his response to the colonial experience, and the reading public demonstrated an almost insatiable desire for stories of imperial adventure in exotic places.⁵

It is interesting to note that Hardy had an example on his own doorstep of successful immigration to Australia in the form of Tom Roberts,⁶ a Dorchester man. Tom was thirteen when he emigrated with his mother in 1869. He studied art in Australia, won a scholarship to Melbourne National Gallery School, and in 1881 he studied at the Royal Academy, London. Roberts returned to Australia and became one of the first Australian impressionists. He later settled in London for twenty years, returning to Australia in 1923, where he died eight years later. It is highly likely that Hardy knew of Roberts as Dorchester was a small market town where everyone knew everyone else.⁷

Between 1815 and 1912 a staggering 212 million Britons emigrated, the majority to the U.S.A. and Canada. Between 1815 and 1840, 499,000 emigrated to Canada, 417,000 to the U.S.A. and 58,000 to Australia (Sherington 1990: 37). The work of the Land

⁵ See chapter 3, 'The "civilized" in crisis: Haggard, Conrad, and Hardy' in Daniel Bivona, *Desire and Contradiction. Imperial Visions and Domestic Debates in Victorian Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 75-112.

⁶ See http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/roberts_tom.html.

⁷ According to *Kelly's Directory of Dorsetshire* (London: Kelly & Co., 1889), the population of Dorsetshire in 1861 was 188,789; in 1871, 195,537 and in 1881, 191,028. The population of Dorchester in 1889 was 7,567. The statistics are to be found on p. 1152.

and Emigrant Commission, which offered assisted passages,⁸ boosted the number of British immigrants in Australia. Numbers increased annually until the late 1880s, when assisted passages were discontinued, and a depression had set in in Australia.

In considering the three levels of knowledge about the Empire presented at the beginning, one may ask: 'What did the British migrant know about conditions in Australia'? A number of books were published in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of these, and particularly the earlier ones, gave an idealised picture of the opportunities emigration offered, and they clearly underplayed the difficulties of the settler's life. Froude's *Oceana*, for example, published in 1884, depicted the colonies as marvellous places and valuable assets to the Empire. By the 1870s, more books began to appear on the Australian continent. Edwin Carton Booth's *Australia Illustrated*, for instance, contained rosy descriptions of life in Australia and emphasised the bright prospects for emigrants. Anthony Trollope's newspaper reports painted an optimistic picture of the spacious life of wealthy station owners.

By the mid-1890s, however, it was no longer possible to write optimistic descriptions and reports on the lines of the earlier publications. A more realistic view was gradually evolving, one which reflected the changing prospects of Australia in the early 1890s as a result of severe droughts, strikes and a series of economic crises caused by a widespread reliance on insecure loans.⁹ The situation had indeed become so serious that by 1899 statistics showed that departures exceeded arrivals for the first time in Australian history (Richie 1975: 167). While Dickens' novels reflect the optimism of the first and middle parts of the nineteenth century, Hardy's final novel shows how the tide had begun to turn, and how return to the mother country was not only a possibility but even a

⁸ For a discussion of how assisted passages affected British emigration to Australia, see Robert F. Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor. Australian Recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831-1860* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997).

⁹ For an excellent discussion of the situation in Australia in the 1890s see Marjorie Barnard, *A History of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), ch. xvi, 'The Nineties'.

necessity for many. One may even speculate that Hardy's knowledge of Darwin's theory of survival and adaptation would have made him more sceptical than Dickens to the idea of emigrating to Australia.

Another interesting aspect of the 1890s which has a direct bearing on the fate of Arabella in *Jude the Obscure* is the change in perception of the distance between Australia and the mother country. During the 1860s, when Dickens was writing his novels, the poor communications, the dangers involved in the long sea journey, and the lack of knowledge about the true conditions prevailing in Australia created a feeling of separateness between the known world of Britain and the unknown Australian continent. This is why the Peggottys, the Micawbers, Martha, Emily and Magwitch could start again, adopt a new identity and create brand new lives for themselves in Australia. By the 1880s, however, there was a growing desire on the part of both Australia and Britain to stress the strong affiliations between both countries. An increased flow of goods and people encouraged exchange of knowledge, which gradually modified British views of Australia, and made return to the mother country not only easier but more natural. Hardy's Arabella and her family not only return with apparent ease, but are also able to describe conditions on the basis of personal experience of Melbourne. As I have argued elsewhere (*Knowledge and Survival in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* 2002: ch. 4), Arabella is a survivor. She sees emigration to Australia as a way out of her difficulties. When she realises she has made the wrong choice, nothing is more natural than to return to southern England to make a fresh start.

I should now like to take a closer look at the careers of those characters in *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Jude the Obscure* who emigrate to Australia. I shall begin with the Micawbers, Emily and Martha in *David Copperfield*. They represent the first level of knowledge mentioned earlier, namely the idealised, in which Australia is a mysterious continent promising a fresh start and from which return is neither possible nor desirable; I then move on to the ex-convict Magwitch in *Great Expectations*, who represents the second level of knowledge, where return is physically possible but

undesirable due to social and legal restrictions; finally reaching the third level of knowledge, in which return is possible, desirable and natural.

Mr Micawber is intensely human and it is the comic life of the Micawber family which, in the words of Graham Storey (1991: 51), adds 'buoyancy' to the novel. Micawber is an incurable optimist. Unlike his wife, he feels sure that his financial difficulties will ultimately resolve themselves. The pawning of the family's few precious possessions, imprisonment for debt and constant harassment by local traders have no more than a temporary effect on him. Why then does he finally decide to emigrate to Australia? Interestingly, it is not Micawber's idea at all, but Aunt Betsey's. Neither Aunt Betsey nor Micawber has much knowledge of Australia – the narrator quite simply states that 'it is, under existing circumstances, the land, the only land, for [Micawber] and [his] family' (ch. 54).

Micawber has little conception of the distance between Australia and England (this may even be wilful ignorance, of course): '[i]t is no distance – comparatively speaking' (ch. 54), he says. He entertains vague notions of becoming a farmer, but clearly has no previous experience. Australia is an unknown quantity, and a last resort. At the same time, it is a new start. As Mrs Micawber observes, 'Mr Micawber is going to a distant country, expressly in order that he may be fully understood and appreciated for the first time Enough of delay: enough of disappointment: enough of limited means. That was in the old country. This is the new' (ch. 57).

Mr Micawber's vision of Australia is based on ignorance, and the reader's knowledge of the continent is certainly not increased by reading the novel. At the same time, the sympathy of the reader is excited: s/he wants him to succeed. While critics such as G.K. Chesterton have argued that Mr Micawber is imprudent and unrealistic,¹⁰ his incorrigible optimism appeals to the reader, who hopes that Australia will offer him the chance – so long denied him in England – to succeed. As Humphry House has argued:

¹⁰ See *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), ch. XI.

The moral of Micawber is that even in a man as fantastically as improvident and as gay about it as he, there is a secret possibility of success. . . . Micawber got the better of the prudent philosophers both on the swings and on the roundabouts. For sixty-two chapters he was saying in the very best Dickens manner, 'See how wonderful and lovable a thoroughly unthrifty and imprudent man can be,' and in the sixty-third he turned round and showed that even he could do well enough for himself when the *right thing* turned up (my italics. 85).

The 'right thing' for Mr Micawber is Australia, the proper destination for those looking for a new start. It also offers a chance of success.

Martha, Emily and the Peggotys sail on the same ship as the Micawbers. Mr Peggotty is the only one to return to England, and this for only four weeks. 'We've done nowt but prosper', he says. 'That is, in the long run. If not yesterday, why then to-day. If not to-day, why then to-morrow' (ch. 63). Farming is clearly the source of the emigrants' prosperity, but there are no details.

Of the fates of the two fallen women, Martha and Emily, it is Martha's which is the more convincing because here Dickens is able to draw on personal experience. While Emily buries herself in her work of tending the sick and teaching young children as a means of wiping out the past, Martha acknowledges and proclaims her mistakes. She insists that her future husband be told that she was a prostitute before they marry. She describes this as her 'trew story' (ch. 63). It is a story familiar to Dickens, who knew that there was a shortage of women in Australia¹¹ and that as a consequence many prostitutes were able to find husbands. Dickens' knowledge does not extend to conditions in Australia itself, however. He tells us nothing about the couple's lives in Australia. They conveniently disappear 'fower hundred mile away from any voices but their own and the singing birds' (ch. 63). No one can finish their story.

¹¹ For useful statistics, see R.B. Madgwick, *Immigration into Eastern Australia 1788-1851* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1969), pp. 223, 227 and 230-1.

And what about Mr Micawber then? From a hard life in the bush, he has become well-to-do. *How* he became a magistrate in Port Middlebay remains a mystery. All possibility of further information is removed by the departure of Mr Peggotty. Indeed, the narrator clearly tells us not to expect any more details because Agnes and David are never to meet Mr Peggotty again.

The situation is somewhat different in *Great Expectations*, where it is possible, with the aid of clues extracted from the text, to discover important details about Magwitch's life.¹² The story spans sixteen to seventeen years. Magwitch was born in November 1760. He is arrested in 1803 for putting stolen notes into circulation (ch. 42). After being tried and sentenced to transportation he escapes but is later recaptured. He is retried in 1804 and transported to Australia for life. From our knowledge of conditions at the time, we know that the voyage would have taken approximately fifteen or sixteen weeks. This left Magwitch fifteen years in which to prosper; a realistic period borne out by historical records.

When Magwitch recounts his adventures in 'the new world' on his return to England, he emphasises the distance: 'many a thousand mile of stormy water off from this' (ch. 39), he says. The reader's imagination is stimulated, all the more because he gives few details about the source of his prosperity, observing merely that 'I've done wonderful well. There's others went out alonger me as has done well too, but no man has done nigh as well as me' (ch. 39). Magwitch knew the risk he was running by returning to England as a convicted man (there was no pardon for him in the mother country however wealthy he was). Only in Australia can his prosperity earn him respect – and ensure his safety. In England, the past will always catch up with him. Magwitch receives the death sentence. His illness in prison is the reason given for his inability to talk to Pip; instead, it

¹² See David Paroissien, *The Companion to Great Expectations* (Mountfield: Helm Information, 2000), 423-434. My chronology is based on Paroissien's. There are several publications dealing with the convict period in Australia. For an informative discussion of the range of offences, conditions onboard convict ships and acclimatisation of convicts to life in Australia see Alexandra Hasluck, *Unwilling Emigrants. A Study of the Convict Period in Western Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

is Pip who is the supplier of information, telling Magwitch about the fate of his daughter, Estella. The narrator tells us that Magwitch is 'tired out' (ch. 56). His thoughts retreat into the past. Significantly, when Magwitch is retried, his crime is that of returning: 'nothing could unsay the fact that he had returned, and was there in presence of the Judge and Jury. It was impossible to try him for that, and do otherwise than find him Guilty' (ch. 56).

Once Magwitch is sentenced to death, a time limit is put on Pip's opportunity to find out more about his benefactor's life in Australia. The final exchange between Pip and Magwitch reveals that the latter is unable to speak. The secrets of his success follow him to the grave. The narrator opens up one more opportunity for Pip to tell the reader anything he may have discovered about Magwitch's life in Australia, but this is quickly closed by Joe in the penultimate chapter of the novel, as he tells Pip that such a subject is unnecessary between two such old friends (ch. 57).

No such mystery shrouds Australia in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Arabella returns to southern England, followed later by her husband. Both are integrated into English society and able to create new lives for themselves. A number of details are given of their existence in Australia to explain why they have returned. Return is both possible and essential for survival. Emigration was an experiment which failed. *Why* did it fail, and what were the consequences for Arabella and her family?

In Part Third of the novel, Jude suddenly discovers Arabella working in a bar. We learn that the main reason why she has returned is the harsh conditions in Australia. She tells Jude, for example, that her parents had had a 'hard struggle', 'a rough time of it' (Part Fifth, ch. 3), and that her mother had subsequently died of dysentery due to the hot weather. This is a long way from the earlier, idealised pictures of Australia in general circulation.¹³ By the late 1880s, there was a growing awareness of the inaccuracy of many of the earlier, glowing accounts of life in Australia given by such

¹³ See, for example, Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character. A Forecast* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 42.

authors as the earlier mentioned Froude.¹⁴ How much Hardy knew is impossible to say, but we do know that he was an avid reader and frequent visitor to London, and that he was generally well-informed. What is significant in Hardy's case is not so much the extent of the detail – indeed, little detail is required for the purposes of the narrative – but the fact that he does not reproduce the earlier, unrealistic pictures of emigrant life in Australia.

Hardy's interest in Darwin's theory of adaptation and survival is an additional factor. Arabella is one of Darwin's survivors. When reality does not live up to her expectations, she acknowledges her mistake and returns to England. Improvements in communication had made this possible (the journey between Australia and England took only six weeks by the late nineteenth century, as opposed to the fifteen or sixteen during Dickens' lifetime), and new insight into the process of adaptation and survival had demonstrated the advisability of return for certain categories of emigrants. Arabella's encouragement of her husband to emigrate to England is prompted by her need for respectability and financial security. The sudden death of Cartlett suggests that it was as difficult for Australians to adapt to English conditions as it was for English emigrants to adapt to Australian ones.

The remaining chapters of the novel make no further reference to Australia. Arabella has learned her lesson and she sets about the business of making maximum use of opportunities in the mother country. As a work of fiction, *Jude the Obscure* was not intended to provide detailed information about life in Australia. Hardy stressed indeed that his novels were works of art and not social or philosophical commentaries. Nonetheless, sufficient detail is provided of Arabella's life in Australia to whet the appetite of the curious reader eager to learn more about the continent which was

¹⁴ See, for example, R.W. Dale's criticism of Froude in *Impressions of Australia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 10-12. As early as 1873, Anthony Trollope had pointed to the problems and almost inevitable failure of female immigrants who hoped 'to earn by their talents and acquirements that bread which a too crowded market make it difficult for them to find'. See *Australia and New Zealand* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968. First published in 1873), 499.

attracting increasing attention in the books and newspapers of the time.

The three novels I have discussed here demonstrate a change in the British perception of Australia. While Dickens' novels reflect an idealised picture of conditions facing emigrants, Hardy acknowledges that return to the mother country is both possible and, in some cases, even advisable. The three levels of knowledge of the empire which I have presented in relation to *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Jude the Obscure* indicate a significant advance in knowledge in the space of thirty years when it comes to the physical, social and economic conditions prevailing in Australia.

To return to a point made earlier: human knowledge is a socially constructed knowledge of the human world. We not only discover reality, but make it as well. Dickens and Hardy did more than reflect the level of knowledge about Australia at the time of writing, they helped form it in the minds of their readers. By the 1890s it was becoming increasingly clear that there was, to return to Bernard O'Dowd's poem quoted at the beginning, no 'millennial Eden' lurking beneath the face of Australia. Hardy knew that the prosperity and happiness of the Micawbers and Peggottys in the new land was not for the likes of Arabella. It is this knowledge of Australia which Hardy communicated to his readers and which his readers considered and debated between each instalment.

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