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Reviewed by Sidney F. Huttner

Sean Grass has found a good story and tells it winsomely. Thoroughly scholar-
ly, his prose trips merrily along, deftly skirting obscurantist fences and walls of academic qualification. Grass argues that the literary-critical community, in-
cluding most of the Dickens’s Industry, has regarded *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–
65), the last novel Charles Dickens’s completed before his death (1870), as, at
best not among his finest work, and at worst, “his poorest book” which failed
commercially and critically in his own time and fails to find readers today. *Our
Mutual Friend* is characterized as hastily composed, unconvincingly plotted,
with awkward themes worked without much subtlety, and hence rightly dis-
missed. Is there in fact evidence, Grass asks, to support these judgments? If not,
has the novel been unfairly treated and deserves better?

Grass has an enormous pile of data to mine. Dickens’s outline, manuscript,
and the proofs he corrected, all still exist (the first two at Pierpont Morgan,
the last in NYPL’s Berg Collection), as does a rich, extensive Chapman &
Hall archive, and a great numbers of letters scattered hither and yon. Starting
with Dickens’s Postscript to *OMF*, Grass organizes his coal chunks around
just five chapters in a scant 160 pages. The first recounts Dickens’s life situa-
tion and near death in a railway accident a few weeks before he began *OMF*,
tracing the effect of that experience on his writing (description of the accident
is expanded in an appendix). The second examines the manuscript and proofs
closely to recover details of Dickens’s decisions as his ideas developed though
the twenty monthly parts. The third marshals production data for initial pub-
lication, quickly reassembled into book formats. The fourth considers all the
contemporary reviews and notices (forty-one in number, collected in full text
in an appendix). The fifth and final chapter discusses attitudes toward the novel
after 1870, attitudes perhaps unduly influenced by Henry James’s unrelenting
attack on the novel, made shortly after the final part was issued. James was
twenty-two years old and nearly five years away from his own first novel.

Although comparative information is not fully available, despite the depth
of surviving records, the evidence clearly points to the novel’s financial success

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copies of nearly half the 2,000 or more American editions of Owen Meredith’s narrative
poem *Lucile* (1860) and maintains a project website at http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/lucile.
in terms near those of Dickens’s best-selling work, somewhat diminished, perhaps, by circumstances of time, place, and economy over which he had no control. Grass traces the critical disdain to the lingering effects of an elite Victorian critical and cultural community that had limited tolerance, at best, for Dickens’s stance on social and political issues, attitudes which James’s review reflects and other reviews make explicit. The conclusion here necessarily remains open to debate, but Glass certainly put forth an articulate defense for the proposition that ordinary readers received the book well, a fact that by itself may have increased the hostility of the establishment.

The much good in the book aside, a general reader is left with questions. Ashgate permitted sixteen color plates, all reduced to 4.5 × 5.5 inches: no information is given on the percentage reductions (which seem to vary considerably). Six reproduce “slips”—pages?—from the manuscript, all captioned as showing “innumerable erasures and corrections.” Which they certainly do. But little more: even with a magnifying glass, it is difficult to convince oneself that the dense array of apparent fly-specks makes up letters and words. Three reproduce openings from the “monthly plans;” somewhat larger (?), they are reasonably legible under magnification. Three reproduce pages from the proofs, one a matching page “from the first edition in two volumes” (and the first published part? Or was the text re-typeset?); three compare draft and finished illustrations. While pains are taken with the manuscript and the process of its writing, descriptions of the post-parts editions are scant (though it could be argued these are readily found elsewhere in Dickens’s bibliography). In a four page “Selected Bibliography of Editions,” bringing together brief remarks elsewhere, Grass throws up his hands at any analysis of the many—many!—American editions, rightly noting any attempt would be a long and painful slog (though 1870–1920, the age of stereotypes and electrotypes, might not be that difficult?).

Still, Glass’s prose is supple and soothing enough that halfway through the first chapter I realized, with surprise, that I had forgotten my first reaction to the book: an in-your-face reminder of how unpleasant Ashgate productions were, in their practical but plasticky covers, straining to look refined, but achieving only vulgarity; with glossy, oh-so-white paper and page after page after unforgiving page of massed text, set in 9-pt. type so dense it is difficult to find even the occasional paragraph break, of which there are rarely more than one or two to the page. Fortunately, in this case, the text works despite the design.1

1. This review was written before Ashgate’s unexpected announcement (3 August 2015) that it had been purchased by Informa and was now part of the Taylor & Francis group. Absorption plans were not outlined, and the first indications of change was closure of its US office on 25 November: some staff were moved to Taylor & Francis’s New York City office and a group of editors laid off. It is impossible at this writing (11 December 2015) to predict in what dress future titles will emerge; but we can hope they will in every way present good texts, like Glass’s, only more handsomely.