

Book Review: Dickens and Race

by Blog Admin

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Dickens and Race offers a unique contextualisation of Dickens's fictional engagements with race in relation to his lesser-known journalism, with wider nineteenth-century debates about differences between humans, with issues of empire, and with the race shows of London. A potentially invaluable resource for students interested in Charles Dickens, Victorian studies, racial difference and empire, and childhood, writes **Steven Harkins**.

Dickens and Race. Laura Peters. Manchester University Press. January 2013.

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Did the social critic, 'champion of the oppressed', and celebrated Victorian novelist Charles Dickens advocate genocide on behalf of the British Empire? This is one of the questions tackled by [Laura Peters](#) in her new book *Dickens and Race*, published to coincide with the bicentenary of one of the best known literary figures from the Victorian era.

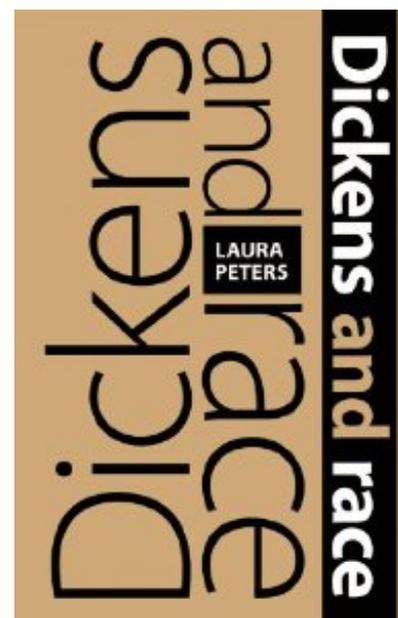
Peters is a specialist in nineteenth-century literature and this book examines literature, journalism, and letters written by Charles Dickens in order to produce a thoroughgoing, sharp, and surprising examination of his often controversial views on the subject of racial difference. The book examines how Dickens' early views on the subject of race are shaped by his voyages in the 'paper boats' of boyhood African adventure stories, alongside other narratives from his childhood like the *Tales of the Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*. As an adult, Dickens was to become

'attracted to the increasingly influential narrative of science' in order to gain a better understanding of racial difference. Although Dickens' views on race were to change over time, Peters argues that his thoughts were consistently shaped by the two influential ideas of the 'exotic of fancy' and the 'scientific narrative of racial thinking'.

In chapter 3, Peters examines Dickens' 1853 essay on *The Noble Savage*, arguing that it represents 'part of a continuum of thinking about race that spans over 12 years'. This runs contrary to the view of Grace Moore, a fellow scholar of Dickens, who argues that the piece is at odds with the author's wider body of work. Peters does an excellent job of contextualising *The Noble Savage* by examining the practice of holding exhibitions of different races; she also highlights the ongoing debates about slavery and Dickens' own visit to America in 1842. Dickens sees a dichotomous relationship between civilisation and savagery to which race is central. He rejects the concept of nobility in other races because he understands them to be 'biologically inferior'. One of Dickens' most controversial quotations from *The Noble Savage* comes when he asserts; 'I call a savage something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth'. Scholars like Bernth Lindfors have argued that Dickens was calling for 'cultural, not literal genocide'. However, in the following chapter, Peters is able to cast doubt over this view.

Chapter 4 focuses on Dickens' response to the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, an event described in India as their 'First War of Independence'. News coverage of the incident at the time focused on false allegations of enforced cannibalism which 'served to mobilise the society around a discourse of extermination'. In a letter written in October of the same year Dickens argues that:

'I wish I were Commander in Chief in India. The first thing I would do to strike that Oriental race...should be to proclaim to them, in their language,...that I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested;...to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth.'



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Peters describes the letter as advocating 'genocide as a response to the Indian mutiny'; her close examination of the literature of this period concludes that 'this extermination rhetoric continues throughout the 1850s and beyond, becoming more ominous until it arrives at the deadly eugenic rhetoric at the turn of the century'. The Indian uprising of 1857 also influenced one of Dickens' most famous works, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The novel is set in the build up to and during the French Revolution and was published in 1859, just two years after the Indian rebellion. Dickens emphasises the racial difference of the French revolutionaries who are portrayed as 'dusky', and just as he had described the uprising in India this narrative portrays the French revolutionaries as 'savages, murderous mobs and cannibals' while the heroic characters are 'primarily British'. This description of France sees the continuation of the colonial idea of civilisation in Britain juxtaposed with savagery overseas. By invoking concepts like cannibalism Dickens is still viewing the world through 'the lens of the exotic'; although this type of thinking was to face a sustained challenge from the scientific discourses of the 1860s.

In chapter 5 Peters examines how Dickens' views were challenged by the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1859. This book 'altered permanently' the way that society was to think about race. These advancing scientific discourses led Dickens to experience a crisis in his lifelong engagement with fancy which had 'lost some of its transformative power, replaced by rational knowledge.' Herbert Spencer's influence is notably absent from this final chapter, which provides an account of Dickens' writing throughout the 1860s. Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest' in his 1864 book *Principles of Biology* and his arguments are very similar to those expressed by Dickens in his final years. The latter part of Dickens' life saw him focus on 'the clear linkage between neglected children, degeneration and savagery'. This is a period when Dickens writes about savagery in London, amongst the street-children of Covent Garden in his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. Peters' research also highlights an unconventional way of understanding Dickens' writing on the subject of poverty. She argues that Dickens understands the East End of London as 'a site of a degenerating race of urban poor'. This type of thinking, linking evolutionary concepts to social issues, was propagated by Herbert Spencer and would later be understood as 'Social Darwinism'.

This enlightening book offers an unconventional perspective on Charles Dickens' thinking on race and how it was influenced by debates, discoveries and historical events. These events have been expertly placed within a social, political and historical context. This makes the book a potentially invaluable resource for students in a variety of disciplines. One of the most striking findings when reading this the book is that it highlights how little popular discourses on race and poverty have advanced since the era of Charles Dickens.

Steven Harkins is an ESRC funded PhD candidate based in the in the Journalism Studies Department at the University of Sheffield. He is also a tutor and occasional lecturer in the same department. His PhD research focuses on reporting poverty and inequality in the UK press with a particular emphasis on the relationship between journalists and their sources. He holds a BA (Hons) in Journalism and Politics from the University of Stirling and an MSc with distinction in Media and Communication research from the University of Strathclyde. [Read more reviews by Steven.](#)