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### [Review of: J. Hofer-Robinson (2018) Dickens and Demolition: Literary afterlives and mid-nineteenth century urban development]

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## Reviews

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***Dickens and Demolition: Literary Afterlives and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Urban Development*, by Joanna Hofer-Robinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), xvi + 248 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781474420983**

Dickens's relationship to London is a fascinating but well-explored topic, and so demands an originality of approach from critics who undertake to address it. Joanna Hofer-Robinson's book tackles this challenge by exploring two specific and interconnected features of Dickens's engagement with the city: the question of 'demolition', or what Chapter One calls 'Metropolitan Improvements' (p. 19), and the question of 'Dickensian Afterlives' (p. 91), which appears in the title of Chapter Three. Hofer-Robinson argues both that Dickens's fiction 'was used to construct or define cultural and spatial identities in advance of demolitions' (p. 5) and that later commentators 'mine Dickens's novels for images of London's past to describe changes that had already occurred or were partially incomplete' (p. 5). The book is keen to lay emphasis on the 'dialectical relations between past, present and future, through which London's modernisation was conceived and represented' (p. 5).

Chapter One gives a useful historical overview of the shifting state of metropolitan development during Dickens's career, noting the 'protracted and piecemeal' (p. 23) manner in which construction took place before 1855, under the more or less engaged direction of 'competing interests and coexisting administrative bodies' (p. 24). As other scholars have done, Hofer-Robinson highlights the establishment of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 as a watershed in London's development, after which construction became more systematic and unified. This chapter also begins to trace how Dickens's writing intersects with the complex web of interested bodies that reshaped London. The middle-class interest in penetrating the houses of the poor that Hofer-Robinson identifies here – famously

evoked in Dickens's reference to Asmodeus in *Dombey and Son* – is also the topic of Barbara Leckie's recent *Open Houses* (2018), building on earlier work such as Joseph Childers's *Novel Possibilities* (1995) and Ruth Livesey's 'Reading for Character' (*Journal of Victorian Culture* 9.1, 2004).

As the first chapter states, *Dickens and Demolition* 'chiefly focuses on the afterlives of *Oliver Twist*' (p. 43), and it is this novel that dominates Chapters Two, Three and Five. Most comprehensive in uniting Hofer-Robinson's interests in demolition and Dickensian afterlives are Chapters Three and Five, each of which offers a case study of how a London location made infamous by *Oliver Twist* was reinterpreted in the wake of Dickens's writing. The first is Field Lane, the disreputable street which lies close to Fagin's den. As throughout the book, Hofer-Robinson draws on a wide range of archival sources (helpfully listed on pp. 214-18) to analyse how Dickens's description of the area was used to justify, explain and eventually mourn the demolition of Field Lane. Although this demolition was desirable to extend Farringdon Street and enable new railway connections, it took a troubled and complicated path, exacerbated because 'it was unclear to whose jurisdiction the area belonged' (p. 105). Chapter Five turns to Jacob's Island, the area of Bill Sikes's death, which was riddled with stagnant inlets from the Thames and hence suffered major cholera outbreaks in 1832 and 1848 (p. 175). Hofer-Robinson shows how in the 1840s Dickens was 'credited with alerting the reading public to the existence of Jacob's Island' (p. 180). Dickens would later draw on his own depiction of the area when he became involved in the Metropolitan Sanitary Association in the 1850s, as well as being embroiled in a public clash over the matter with Sir Peter Laurie, who called Dickens's condemnatory descriptions 'cant and humbug' (p. 187).

Chapter Four is interested in Dickens's engagement with philanthropic construction

schemes, mainly through his partnership with Angela Burdett-Coutts. This chapter draws attention to Dickens's involvement with influential networks of reformers, including his brother-in-law Henry Austin and Dr Southwood Smith, whom he recommended to Burdett-Coutts as an advisor on construction work at Columbia Square. Less directly relevant to the book's interest in construction and demolition is Chapter Two, the fantastically named 'Sets and the City', though it is still interesting on its own terms. This chapter investigates how the many dramatizations of *Oliver Twist* that sprung up in the late 1830s constructed 'multiple images of the city' (p. 83), some more sympathetic to the poor or more interested in sensationalising London's criminality than others.

While the book's relatively narrow focus might limit its appeal, within that remit it is often interesting and instructive. The archival material Hofer-Robinson unearths convincingly shows that Dickens and *Oliver Twist* played a major part in the improvement debates of the mid-nineteenth-century; and that cultural and political allusions to Dickens's work shifted in subtle ways, and were used for multiple purposes, through the decades that followed.

**Ben Moore (University of Amsterdam)**

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