Madness and the Dickens Marriage: a new source

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A cache of letters recently deposited at Harvard University gives detailed and shocking new information about the break-up of Dickens’s marriage in 1858.[[1]](#endnote-1) Until now, most accounts have come from Dickens’s side of the story but this new source tells it from the point of view of his wife Catherine. Critics and biographers have known for years how badly Dickens behaved at this time: among other things, he blocked up the door between their bedrooms and falsely claimed that Catherine ‘does not – and she never did- care for the children; and the children do not – and never did – care for her.’[[2]](#endnote-2) The new source supplements this information in an important way; it comes from Catherine’s lifetime, derives directly from her, and tells her side of the story. It both confirms things that we know from other sources - about Ellen Ternan and her subsequent marriage for example - but also adds what is a significant new dimension. Sadly, it is not one that makes Dickens’s role seem any better.

Unsurprisingly, many - but not all - of the sources that we currently have are from Dickens himself or those around him. Catherine, by contrast, seems to have maintained a dignified silence about what was a profoundly distressing time and sequence of events for her. But she evidently spoke to family and friends and this would have been an easier thing for her to do after Dickens’s death in 1870. She was concerned in her final years before her own death in 1879 to set the record, if not straight, then at least a bit straighter. It is then that she gave her letters from Dickens to her daughter Kate Perugini to give to the British Museum ‘that the world may know that he loved me once’.[[3]](#endnote-3) The new material helps us to understand her feelings and reactions both at the time of the break-up and subsequently; it tells us about her resentment towards Dickens’s friend John Forster; and gives new information about what happened in the terrible months between Dickens’s first meeting with Ellen Ternan and the final parting of the ways between Dickens and Catherine.

The key events of the break-up of the Dickens marriage began in autumn 1857 when during rehearsals and subsequent performances of Wilkie Collins’ play *The Frozen Deep* Dickens met and evidently fell in love with Ellen Ternan. There had been some anticipations before of Dickens’s restlessness and lack of satisfaction with his marriage but from then on there was a very rapid acceleration and intensification of events. There was a particularly troubled period of about a year during which Dickens sought to free himself from Catherine in various ways until finally in June 1858, a separation agreement was made between John Forster acting for Dickens and Mark Lemon acting for Catherine. Catherine moved out to her new home in Gloucester Crescent in May around the time of her forty-third birthday, with her eldest son Charley.

There is one particularly important aspect of that long and contested process that I want to focus on, which is a particular claim about Catherine that Dickens made in what he called - but I don’t think we should - the ‘Violated Letter’.[[4]](#endnote-4) There is a good deal of violation of various sorts in the story of the separation but the letter does not deserve the adjective, as it was designed by Dickens to be circulated. It might be better to call it the ‘violating letter’, violating in many of the senses in the OED: ‘to break, infringe, or contravene (a law or rule, etc) … to fail to keep … an oath or promise …to act in a way inconsistent with or contrary to (a moral quality or accepted standard of behaviour) … to interrupt, disturb, disrupt … to intrude upon (a person's privacy).’ On 25 May 1858, somewhere near the climax of what was evidently an intense marital conflict, Dickens wrote the letter to his reading manager Arthur Smith and said that he could show to others, which Smith duly did. Almost inevitably, it reached the press and was published in August 1858 in New York and then in various English newspapers.

The letter makes various false charges against Catherine - that she didn’t love her children for example – but the most disturbing is this passage:

For some years past Mrs. Dickens has been in the habit of representing to me that it would be better for her to go away and live apart; that her always increasing estrangement made a mental disorder under which she sometimes labours — more, that she felt herself unfit for the life she had to lead as my wife and that she would be better far away.[[5]](#endnote-5)

‘a mental disorder under which she sometimes labours’: Dickens was semi-publically or indeed publically asserting that his wife Catherine suffered from ‘a mental disorder’. That would be a serious things to say at any time, but particularly so at this juncture of the marriage and process of separation and in the particular context of the 1850s. Lillian Nayder in her biography of Catherine describes it as ‘shocking’; Claire Tomalin in her life of Dickens as ‘shameful’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Dickens also made a similar accusation privately, writing to Angela Burdett Coutts, for example, to say of Catherine ‘her mind has, at times, been certainly confused besides’.[[7]](#endnote-7) On its own, we might be inclined to dismiss these simply as phrases – careless or unfortunate ones perhaps - but not more than that. But their potentially incendiary nature was recognised at the time. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it

What a dreadful letter that was! And what a crime for a man to use his genius as a cudgel ... against the woman he promised to protect tenderly with life and heart … I call it dreadful.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The phrase ‘mental disorder’ was seen as a particularly grievous provocation by Catherine’s family. We know this this from a second contemporary source - this time from Catherine’s side, from her aunt, Helen Thomson, Mrs George Hogarth's youngest sister.

Evidently provoked by Dickens’s unfounded claim, Thomson wrote a detailed account of Dickens’s behaviour at the time to her friend Mrs Stark. Her account begins:

I cannot pretend on paper to give you a detailed account of this most distressing event … without entering at more length than could be agreeable to you, but from a recent insertion of a letter which Dickens had written to a friend in America now going the round of the press, in which he talks of his wife occasionally labouring under *mental disorder,* I think it only right to contradict that statement, to such a friend as you; he did indeed endeavour to get the physician who attended her in illness, to sanction such a report, when he sternly refused, saying he considered Mrs. Dickens perfectly sound in mind, consequently he dared not in England assert anything of the kind. That her spirits were low was not surprising, considering the manner in which she had been treated; but I assure you, my dear Mrs. Stark, she had no desire to leave her home or children so long as that home was endurable to her,[[9]](#endnote-9)

It is the claim of mental disorder in particular that seems to have provoked this blistering response by Catherine’s family – in a letter that seems to have been destined to be copied and circulated privately. For a number of years it was dismissed as fraudulent but K. J. Fielding showed in 1955 that it was not, and that we could give it authority as one of the fullest contemporary accounts of Dickens’s behaviour.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The publication of the ‘violated’ letter and the lies that it told had provoked this counterattack; the key provocation was the claim that Catherine was suffering from a mental disorder. But Thomson adds something extra and important, which is that Dickens endeavoured ‘to get the physician who attended her in illness, to sanction such a report’. Some medical practioner who was treating Catherine was asked to ‘sanction’ - to approve or to circulate or to agree – that she was in some sense or way mentally afflicted or disordered. Dickens didn’t simply assert this, as in the letter to Smith; he also tried, Thomson states, to get medical evidence to have it confirmed, by an inevitably male doctor. It is not exactly clear from Thomson’s letter what exactly ‘such a report’ means. It could mean that Dickens meant his own report or account and that he would then report this claim with medical authority in the ‘violated’ letter or elsewhere. Or might it mean a report of a more formal nature, of the sort that might be used to commit someone for treatment or incarceration? A second consequence of this letter is that, if what it says is true, Dickens consciously circulated something he knew not to be true. The doctor, it seems, told Dickens that Catherine was sane, but Dickens nevertheless allowed the letter making the claim that she might not be to circulate. On the whole this hasn’t been a possibility that Dickens biographers have pursued. But it could it be true? Not just that Dickens claimed in the semi-public letter that Catherine had a mental disorder but that he took steps to have her put away?

The most detailed discussion of the context of Dickens’s remark about Catherine’s mental condition comes in a brilliant, speculative chapter by John Sutherland in *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers Readers*, in which he reconstructs the very particular historical, legal and fictional context against which the events of the separation took place, and shows in detail how hot the topic of the madness of literary wives was at the time that Charles and Catherine Dickens were negotiating their separation.[[11]](#endnote-11) Dickens was close friends with Edward Bulwer-Lytton, both a politician and one of the leading novelists of the day. Bulwer and his wife Rosina had a very conflicted and unhappy marriage which culminated in Rosina appearing at an election husting in June 1858 to denounce Bulwer as ‘a monster who should have been transported to the colonies long ago for mistreating his wife and murdering his daughter.’[[12]](#endnote-12) It was a deep humiliation and Bulwer responded by having Rosina seized, certified insane and incarcerated in a private asylum. After a public outcry, she was judged sane and freed.

Writers of fiction were, Sutherland shows, deeply interested in this case; Wilkie Collins’s *The* W*oman in White* (1859-60) published in Dickens’s magazine *All the Year Round* turned on the wrongful placing in an asylum of a sane woman, the uncooperative wife of Sir Percival Glyde, who was a baronet like Bulwer. Charles Reade’s *Very Hard Cash* (1863) which appeared a little later in *All the Year Round* became a lengthy polemic against private madhouses and the power they gave families to get awkward members out of the way. For Sutherland this provides the necessary context for understanding exactly what a significant, and to Catherine frightening, charge Dickens was making in the’ violated letter’. Comply, is its implicit message or look what might happen to you. John Forster, Dickens’s most loyal friend and agent, was Secretary to the Commissioners of Lunacy, and Dickens was close friends with Dr John Conolly, who had first certified Rosina Bulwer insane and then a mere three weeks later, sane.

Sutherland then imagines ‘what must have gone through Catherine Dickens’s mind on discovering the contents of the Violated Letter’.

To be accused of motherly indifference to children and ‘mental disorder’ with Dr John Conolly and John Forster (now a Commissioner in Lunacy) hovering in the background was highly ominous. It is significant that Catherine would not accept Forster as an intermediary, insisting on Lemon (the homespun editor of Punch). Forster, she may have thought, knew far too much about locking up women with ’mental disorder’. For a physician like Conolly, Mrs Dickens’ alleged ‘languor’ and her excitability about her husband’s infidelity would have been quite sufficient for a certificate of ‘moral insanity’ to be drawn up. He did it for Lord Lytton, would he not do the same for his friend Mr Dickens?[[13]](#endnote-13)

In fact Rosina Bulwer Lytton’s incarceration occurred in June, after Catherine had already left the marital home in May, so Dickens may have anticipated rather than followed Bulwer’s plot against Rosina. It was a clearly a febrile atmosphere, which may account for a strangely impersonal letter from Dickens to Bulwer from early June 1858, ‘Regretting that his absence from town on 26 June will prevent him from having the honour of dining with Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton.’[[14]](#endnote-14) The Pilgrim editors note that ‘It seems impossible that CD should address an old friend so formally’, which suggests either that Dickens disapproved of what Bulwer was doing, or was at least seeking to distance himself from his behaviour at such a sensitive time.[[15]](#endnote-15) Sutherland, however, does not claim that Dickens actually attempted to incarcerate Catherine in the way that Bulwer had:

It is extremely unlikely that Dickens intended to incarcerate Catherine. It is equally unlikely that he wanted to alienate her permanently from her children. What he may have intended was, like Lytton at the same period, to ‘show her the instruments’. Give her and her mother a terrifying glimpse, that is, of what he might do.[[16]](#endnote-16)

It might seem that Sutherland is here making an extreme case, a rather lurid suggestion resting on one small phrase – ‘mental disorder’ - and a suggestive context. But, far from overstating the case, Sutherland understates it, for Dickens, like Bulwer, really did try to put Catherine away in an asylum.

2

Edward Dutton Cook (1829-1883) was a mid- to late-Victorian man of letters, novelist and drama critic, first of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and later of *The World* newspaper.[[17]](#endnote-17) *The World* was edited by Edmund Yates, one of Dickens ‘young men’, who became a highly successful literary panjandrum in the period. Cook was thus in networks closely associated with Dickens, both through Yates and elsewhere. He wrote a number of novels in the 1860s and 70s, including *Paul Foster's Daughter* (1861), *Sir Felix Foy, Bart*. (1865), *Hobson's Choice* (1867), and *Young Mrs Nightingale* (1874) and was a productive and fluent writer with a solid and successful journalistic career but no great literary achievement or breakthrough. He has an entry in the *ODNB*, for example, but not in John Sutherland’s *Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*.

In 1874, Cook married. He was then 45, his wife the pianist Linda Scates was 20, and the couple made their marital home at 69, Gloucester Crescent. The address matters: Catherine Dickens, now nearly sixty, had lived in the same road at number 70 in modest style ever since her separation from Dickens, a decade and a half before. Dickens had died four years earlier; Catherine had five left to live. The Cooks both knew the Dickens family well, and had met at Gad’s Hill, not when Dickens was alive but later, after it was bought by his eldest son Charley. Importantly, Linda and Edward formed what was evidently a close friendship with Catherine, and even more importantly, Cook wrote a number of letters about the Dickens family, including several quite detailed ones about Catherine. He at one point reports staying for a few days at Gad’s Hill, for example, and seems to have been a fair-minded and judicious friend of Catherine but not a partisan. His letters give us a good deal of insight into Catherine’s life – including her theatre visits, pleasure in children and grandchildren, and loneliness - and he understands its contexts, literary, familial and personal, well.

Cook’s letters were written to a fellow-journalist and man of letters, William Moy Thomas (1828-1910), who was of a similar age to Cook and also quite closely associated with Dickens and various members of the Dickens family.[[18]](#endnote-18) Thomas had been on the staff of *Household Words* from 1851 until 1858 and then became a drama critic, contributor to *The Daily News* for more than thirty years and later the first editor of *Cassell’s Magazine.* He appears in an entry in *The Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens* ‘ungallantly’ describing Catherine as ‘a great fat lady - florid with arms thick as the leg of a life Guard’s man and red as a beef sausage. Such an Agnes!’[[19]](#endnote-19) There are 98 letters between the two men, which begin in 1870 and go on until 1883, which are full of interesting material about the theatrical and literary worlds of the time. Cook tells Thomas, for example, that he ‘saw The Moonstone on the second night and found it utterly tedious’ and one of Collins’s weakest novels, *The Fallen Leaves* (1879) is dismissed as ‘poor stuff’.[[20]](#endnote-20) But there is no particular animus against Collins: Cook can also praise ‘certain workmanlike qualities about Wilkie Collins’s dramas that command respect’.[[21]](#endnote-21) It is the correspondence of two busy well-connected professional men of letters on friendly terms, who swap gossip about such topics as the discovery of George Cruikshank’s illegitimate family:

There is scandal in this neighbourhood touching that temperate veteran and exemplary moralist the late George Cruikshank. An illicit wife with a family of ten children, the youngest only two years old, has been discovered in Ernest Street, near his house in Hampstead Road.[[22]](#endnote-22)

They discuss the latest plays, report servant problems and help each other’s careers along.

There is also a good deal about Catherine Dickens and the Dickens family. More than thirty of the letters refer to one or more members of the Dickens family, including Dickens himself, Catherine, their children Mamie, Katey and Charley, and Catherine’s sister Georgina Hogarth. Cook writes to Thomas about his dealings with Charley Dickens and the journalism he writes for him as editor of A*ll the Year Round*, reporting, for example, that ‘I am writing a story for the Midsummer number of All the Year Round. What would the late C.D. have thought of such an innovation![[23]](#endnote-23) He lends copies of newspapers and magazines to Catherine,

I have posted my *Worlds* lately to Mrs Dickens who is staying at Cheltenham. She is a student of newspapers and a devotee of gossip. I have been in the habit of lending her the *World* and other journals for some time past. I am always glad, indeed, to contribute in any way to her amusement - for her life is rather dull and solitary [[24]](#endnote-24)

He also tells Thomas over several letters about commissioning a painting by Katey Dickens of their daughter Sylvie and of the sittings that ensued.

Little Sylvie went yesterday to give Mrs Perugini another sitting and returned sugar-plum-ed to the eyes and heavily laden with presents.[[25]](#endnote-25)

He is clearly close to many of the Dickens family, telling Thomas that he has ‘been spending two or three wet days at Gadshill’,[[26]](#endnote-26) and that he has been to dinner with Georgina Hogarth and Mamie Dickens at Catherine’s house.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Cook also records Catherine’s final illness and eventual death from cervical cancer and he is there when she received the telegram bringing the news of the death of John Forster.[[28]](#endnote-28) The letters give insightful glimpses of Catherine’s life at this time, and makes it easier to flesh out her years of widowhood. In January 1879, for example, not long before Catherine died, Cook wrote:

Mrs Dickens, her doctor tells me, is not in immediate danger, unless haemorrhage sets in, but her recovery is hopeless, she suffers very much and would suffer more, but morphine is twice a day being injected into her veins and certainly she grows weaker... she brightened up a bit and amused us all by describing Irving in Othello as “like a Christy Minstrel” gone mad.’[[29]](#endnote-29)

In her final year, there are regular reports on Catherine’s health. In May 1879, for example, he told Thomas that ‘It was the old lady’s birthday yesterday. She is wonderfully better, although the doctor assures me that the change cannot last.’[[30]](#endnote-30) Indeed it could not, as ten days later, he recounts seeing ‘poor Mrs Dickens yesterday. She has dwindled to quite a shadow of her former self – but she was in good spirits and free from pain.’[[31]](#endnote-31)

The question of what is now called ‘reputation management’ was one that was intensely felt by Catherine and by other members of the Dickens family and she was in a difficult and in many ways conflicted position. We can see at least some of this in a letter from February 1878 when Catherine evidently had heard that George Cruikshank was about to publish his memoirs. Cruikshank was indeed writing his memoirs although they were left in manuscript at his death:

the memoirs I hear are to contain a fierce attack upon Dickens because inter alia of his treatment of his wife. Mrs Dickens is a little uneasy on the subject, shrinking rather from a championship she did not ask for which promises moreover to be over officious and clumsy[[32]](#endnote-32)

Learning of the death of John Forster, who had been the guardian of so many of Dickens’s secrets, who had so fiercely defended Dickens in his negotiations over the separation, and who had carefully minimised any possible scandal in his posthumous biography of Dickens, her feelings are much less ambiguous:

We live here in a sort of anti*-*Forster atmosphere from Mrs C.D.’s living next door. She hates him bitterly.[[33]](#endnote-33)

When Cook telegrams to report Forster’s death, Thomas replies:

Many thanks for the Telegram. Mrs Dickens happened to be here when it arrived and thus had the earliest information of the event. Of course she knew Forster well - but she had little reason to like him much - for he was Dickens’ adviser and agent in all the dirty work of the separation. ... John Forster was to have been the god father of the lately born son of Mrs Perugini - formally Mrs Charles Collins and Miss Kate Dickens - It is supposed Forster’s money will go to the Dickens family (excepting Charles) who was not friendly with his parent’s executor and biographer. Forster’s large Library was to have been bequeathed to the nation.[[34]](#endnote-34)

We touch here a moment, of in E. M. Forster’s phrase, ‘telegrams and anger’, an anger undiminished over two decades.[[35]](#endnote-35)

This anger at Forster chimes with another important account of Catherine at this time. Katey spoke to her mother a good deal and told George Bernard Shaw:

During almost every day of that time she spoke to me, whenever I was alone with her, of my father. All her grievances against him came out. Fortunately for myself I had heard *from his own lips* the worst she had to tell me. Of course I did what any daughter would do. I tried to soften her remembrance of him. In a way I succeeded…[[36]](#endnote-36)

It is in this context that we should read the key Cook-Thomas letter from January 1879, about 10 months before Catherine’s death in November. I have already quoted one passage about Catherine’s illness but the letter then continues:

I am very doubtful how far I can write about her, for I am on rather intimate terms with the other members of the family and any hint to the prejudice of C.D. would be received by them as an act of high treason. Now one could not write truthfully about her without reproaching him. Twenty years ago, he was, to my mind, either mad or a scoundrel, and his will reducing her income by more than half was most cruel. ... I am in hopes that his letters to her which are to be included in the book published by Miss Hogarth and Miss Dickens may do much to set her right with the public. I have read many of them and if they are honestly set forth they will show that great affection had subsisted during a long course of years between husband and wife [[37]](#endnote-37)

Cook and Catherine were to be disappointed in that: he wrote later to say that ‘there has been a wholesale suppression of letters’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Catherine, it seems, had intended that at least some of her letters from Dickens should have been included in the collection they published in but her sister and daughter ensured that they were not.

Cook’s central reservation comes in the central part of the letter:

But he discovered at last that she had outgrown his liking. She had borne ten children and had lost many of her good looks, was growing old, in fact. He even tried to shut her up in a lunatic asylum, poor thing! But bad as the law is in regard to proof of insanity he could not quite wrest it to his purpose.[[39]](#endnote-39)

It is a stronger, more detailed and more damning account of Dickens’s behaviour than any other: stronger than the ‘violated’ letter, Helen Thomson’s letter, and Sutherland’s suggestion of ‘showing her the instruments’. Dickens, Thomas tells us, tried to put his wife Catherine in an asylum, through bending the law to his purpose to prove her insane.

Cook then goes on to discuss Ellen Ternan and shows that quite detailed knowledge of Ellen‘s relationship with Dickens and her subsequent life was circulating in the immediate group around Catherine. All this detail, accuracy and lack of sensationalism tends to confirm the authenticity of other things in the letter, including the evidence about the lunatic asylum. The letter continues:

He had fallen in love with Ellen Ternan, who had acted with his amateur troup [*sic*]: he spent a lot of money upon her, buying for her a house in Houghton Place, Oakley Square, and left her £1000 in his will. She has since married a parson in the west of England who knows nothing of the past or prudently shuts his eyes to it. But these are not matters that can be written about, publically. I will consider whether I can really do anything.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Cook clearly wanted to say at least something publically about Catherine but realised that it was impossible, as a later letter after Catherine’s death shows: ‘your editor Hill [Frank Harrison Hill, editor of the *Daily News* 1869-86] is I believe a great friend of Miss Hogarth and Miss Dickens – I suppose therefore he would allow nothing to the prejudice of C.D. to appear in the D.N.’ [[41]](#endnote-41)

There is a good deal of detail in what Cook writes that gives his account a credibility. He gets something wrong; Ellen’s house is usually given as Houghton Place, Ampthill Square rather than Oakley Square but Oakley Square was part of the same Bedford estate and only one street away. He either did not know or was too discreet to say where exactly Ellen was living. But he already knew in the 1870s a great deal that it took later scholars many years to dig out. That strengthens our reasons for taking the new material – that he ‘tried to shut her up in a lunatic asylum’ - seriously. Cook’s own conflicted feelings are seen in a letter he wrote shortly after Catherine’s death:

I feel that it was rather cowardly in me to shrink from writing about poor Mrs D. but the difficulty was great. I could not say what I thought just without offending the family. I made the attempt, as you will see by the enclosed. But I could not satisfy myself that it was wise to publish it: I withheld the little notice and consoled myself that I have been discreet if not valorous or upright.[[42]](#endnote-42)

But the central point is that he confirms a great deal of what we already know and adds the disturbing and distressing new information: that Dickens did not merely suggest or even threaten to have Catherine put away in an asylum but actually attempted to get medical evidence to ‘wrest the law to his purpose’.

It is a serious charge and we may think that this letter, coming from someone so close to Catherine is strong enough evidence in itself, when put next to the violated letter, what Helen Thomson stated, and John Sutherland’s rich contextualisation. But there is a further, final source, which lets us identify the doctor – or one of the doctors - he consulted. It appears in Sarah Wise’s *Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad Doctors in Victorian England*.[[43]](#endnote-43) Discussing the public outcry that broke following the release of Rosina Bulwer-Lytton, Wise points out how closely John Forster as Secretary to Commissioners of Lunacy had been involved in the incarceration process. In 1858, he wrote to Bulwer to say that if the true sequence of events were to be discovered:

It would be a momentous scandal and would require a public inquiry into the lunacy laws and practice.[[44]](#endnote-44)

‘There has been speculation’, Wise continues, ‘about whether Dickens himself ever contemplated the madhouse for his wife Catherine’ and adds:

Descendants of Dr Thomas Harrington Tuke, superintendent of Manor House Asylum in Chiswick between 1849 and 1888, are believed to have seen correspondence in which the novelist asked Tuke to investigate the possibility of having his wife committed to Manor House. Allegedly, Tuke, in reply, refused, on the grounds that there was no evidence that Catherine was of unsound mind. The original letters were handed to a researcher in the 1970s and have been missing ever since; as no copies were ever made, this story cannot be verified.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Thomas Harrington Tuke (1826-88), was the great-grandson of the famous mental health reformer William Tuke who founded the York Retreat and modern humane treatment of the insane.[[46]](#endnote-46) He was the son-in-law of Dr John Conolly, owner of Manor House, Chiswick, a private lunatic asylum, and was evidently well-known to Dickens. There are several letters in the Pilgrim edition and Dickens was a guest at the christening of Tuke’s son in 1853.[[47]](#endnote-47) Not knowing the newly-discovered Cook letters, Wise is rightly cautious and concludes that ‘Until the Tuke letters turn up again. Dickens must surely be permitted the Scottish verdict – i.e. ‘not proven’ - regarding any madhouse plot of his own’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

If it was Tuke, as now seems likely, who was asked to certify Catherine but refused, this may explain a hostile, puzzling letter, written by Dickens to Georgina Hogarth in 1864 when he was looking for a house to rent in London for the summer:

Here Fredk. Chapman came to ask me to go and look at the upper part of a house in Albemarle Street Piccadilly, which could be had for our time and at my figure. I went. Neat Drawing room with 3 windows, small dining room with folding doors, small bedroom beyond. Over that, 3 bedrooms, over them, 2 Servants' bedrooms. The ground floor held professionally - an awful circumstance - by

HARRINGTON TUKE!

—but the wretched Being would probably lend it to us, whenever we wanted it. Landlady's housemaid to remain (in a third servants-bedroom not counted) to attend said Medical Donkey. Situation, of course undesirable.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Something had clearly happened to make Tuke, with whom Dickens had been on friendly terms only a few years earlier, vilified in such a way; it seems likely that it was his refusal to help in the plot against Catherine.

Cook’s account is important for what it tells us about Dickens’s behaviour during the separation and what it suggests about John Forster’s share in the ‘dirty business’, but it also gives us a much fuller picture of Catherine’s life, particularly towards its close. When Dickens’s letters were first collected and published by Georgina Hogarth and Mamie Dickens, a copy of course was sent to Catherine, which she lent to Cook. She had evidently hoped that it would have included more about her life with Dickens but her sister and daughter ensured that it did not. It is unclear from Cook’s account exactly whether Catherine, now near death, realised this, although it seems likely that she did.

The letters are interesting - if a little tedious about the readings - one cannot care now for the raptures of Newcastle, Preston, Leeds etc. But there has been a wholesale suppression of letters – especially those to his wife, showing affection - or the semblance of it – almost to the moment of separation. The old lady lent us her copy before she died. She was too weak to cut the leaves or even to look at it, but she made Mrs Perugini write her name in it.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Only a few days after this sad scene, on a chilly November day in 1879, Cook wrote what is the only first-hand account of Catherine’s funeral:

We have just returned from a very sad and bitterly cold business at Highgate. As my wife much desired to attend the funeral of one who was to her a most dear old friend I hired a brougham and prudently took a well-filled flask with me. It was snowing pretty hard - but the grave proved to be under cover – a sort of vault, but owing to the slope of the hill rather like a cupboard, under the shadow of Highgate Church. I looked to see if there was any friend I could bring back, but with the exception of Fred Evans (the printer not the clown) not a soul was present beyond those who had started from Gloucester Crescent. These were C.D. & H.F.D. and their wives, Miss Dickens (Mamie), Miss Hogarth, Mr & Mrs Perugini, William Hogarth, Wills, Fuller (doctor) Richardson ( lawyer) Old Mr Philp, aged 81, father of Miss [Elizabeth] Philp, the singer and ourselves. There were no mourning couches or plumes or pall. Everything was of the simplest. But the oak coffin was piled up with flowers. It was all very sad, I need hardly say.[[51]](#endnote-51)

1. Dutton Cook Letters to W. Moy Thomas, 1870-1883 (MS Thr 1036). Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. The letters were listed for sale in Pickering and Chatto Antiquarian Booksellers, London, Bulletin 43, April 2014. I am most grateful to Malcolm Andrews, Michael Slater and Claire Tomalin for their advice, and to the staff of the Houghton Library Reading Room for their help. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dickens to Miss Burdett Coutts, 23 August 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, ed. Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 632 [632-4]. See Lillian Nayder, *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine* Dickens (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Michael Slater *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 432-60; Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gladys Storey, *Dickens and Daughter* (London: Frederick Muller, 1939) 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The “Violated” Letter, 25 May 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, Appendix F, 740-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Miss Helen Thomson to Mrs Stark, [30] August 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, Appendix F, 746 [746-9] [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lillian Nayder, *The Other Dickens*, 269; Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Viking, 2011) 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Charles Dickens to Miss Burdett Coutts, 9 May 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858,* 560. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, 648-49, note 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Miss Helen Thomson to Mrs Stark, [30] August 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, Appendix F, 746. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. K. J. Fielding, ‘Charles Dickens and his Wife: Fact or Forgery?’, *Etudes Anglaises* vol. 8, 3 (1955), 212-222. See also W. J. Carlton, ‘Mr and Mrs Dickens: the Thomson-Stark Letter’, *Notes and Queries*, vol. 7, 4, April 1960, 145-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Sutherland ‘Dickens, Reade, *Hard Cash* and Maniac Wives’ in *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (London: Palgrave, 2006) 55-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Brown, Andrew, ‘Lytton, Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer [formerly Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer], first Baron Lytton (1803–1873), writer and politician.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Jan. 2019. See also Virginia Blain, ‘Rosina Bulwer Lytton and the Rage of the Unheard’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 53, 3, Summer 1990, 210-236. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers*, 79. Forster was in fact not a Commissioner in Lunacy at this point, but Secretary to the Commissioners. He became a Commissioner in 1861. See also Richard A. Hunter and Ida MacAlpine, ‘Dickens and Conolly’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1961, 534-5 and Andrew Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in England 170-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 251-2**.** [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Dickens to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 11 June 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858* 583. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858*, 583. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers*, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Boase, G. C. ‘Cook, Edward Dutton (1829–1883), theatre critic and author.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* May 26, 2016. Oxford University Press, Date of access 30 Jan. 2019. For a contemporary obituary, see M. T., ‘MR. DUTTON COOK.’ *The Athenaeum*, no. 2917, 1883, pp. 366-367. ProQuest, https://search.proquest.com/docview/8871157?accountid=15181. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Erben, Michael. ‘Thomas, William Moy (1828–1910), novelist, journalist, and translator.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. Date of access 30 Jan. 2019. For Thomas’s career and many contributions to *Household Words*, see Anne Lohrli (ed.), *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859 conducted by Charles Dickens* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) 445-7. There is one known letter to Thomas from Dickens: Dickens to William Moy Thomas, 28 June 1858, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume 8: 1856-1858* 591. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1999) 155, quoting Sophie Dupre [bookseller] Catalogue 17, item 381, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Edward Dutton Cook to William Moy Thomas, 24 September 1877, (MS Thr 1036). Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Cook to Thomas, 22 March 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Cook to Thomas, 17 September 1877. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Cook to Thomas, 24 February 1878. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Cook to Thomas, 4 April 1877 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cook to Thomas, 1 October 1877. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cook to Thomas, 12 December 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cook to Thomas, 23 February 1876. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. ‘We dined with her [Catherine Dickens] the other night to meet Georgina H. whom I was interested in seeing, and Miss Mary Dickens.’ Cook to Thomas, 15 November 1875. Catherine and her sister dined together ‘from time to time’, Georgina told Annie Fields in 1872: see Nayder, *The Other Dickens*, 331. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. On the cause of Catherine’s death, see Nayder, *The Other Dickens*, 340. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cook to Thomas, 7 January 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Cook to Thomas, 20 May 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Cook to Thomas, 30 May 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cook to Thomas, 24 February 1878. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cook to Thomas, 15 November 1875. Catherine’s dislike of Forster was shared by Rosina Bulwer-Lytton, who nicknamed him ‘Jackal Fudgster’: see Sarah Wise, *Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad-Doctors in Victorian England* (London: Bodley Head, 2012) 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Cook to Thomas, 2 February 1876. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. E. M. Forster, *Howards End* ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Letter from Kate Perugini to George Bernard Shaw late Dec 1897, now in British Library (add mss 50546 79ff), quoted in Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: Dent, 1983) 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Cook to Thomas, 25 November 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Cook to Thomas, 25 November 1879. Dickens, Mary, and Georgina Hogarth (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens. Edited by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter*, 2 vols.(London: Chapman and Hall, 1880). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Cook to Thomas, 7 January 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Cook to Thomas, 7 January 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Cook to Thomas, 7 January 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Cook to Thomas, 25 November 1879. There is no enclosure with the letter. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Sarah Wise, *Inconvenient People: Lunacy, Liberty and the Mad-Doctors in Victorian England* (London: Bodley Head, 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Forster to Bulwer Lytton, 14 March 1859, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, DE/K C23/72, quoted in Wise, *Inconvenient People* 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Wise, *Inconvenient People*, 247-8. Wise adds in a footnote ‘I read the allegation that Dickens wrote to Dr Harrington Tuke about having his wife committed in ‘The Tukes’ Asylum in Chiswick’ by Pamela Bater in *Brentford and Chiswick Local History Journal* no. 14, 2005, pp. 7-10. Harrington’s great-grandson, David Tuke, told me in a phone conversation of 2 September 2011 that his late second-cousin, Yolande, had read the relevant correspondence and told him of its contents.’(428) Bater’s article is available online at: http://brentfordandchiswicklhs.org.uk/publications/the-journal/brentford-chiswick-local-history-journal-14-2005/6846-2/ [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. "Thomas Harrington Tuke." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 27 Oct. 2018. Web. 4 Feb. 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Charles Dickens to Dr F. H. F. Quin, 17 February 1853 *The Letters of Charles Dickens*: *Volume 7: 1853-1855* eds. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Angus Easson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 25-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Wise, *Inconvenient People*, 248. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Dickens to Miss Georgina Hogarth, 3 December, 1864, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Volume* *10: 1862-1864*, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 351-2. The editors note that ‘HARRINGTON TUKE’ is ‘Written in large ornamental caps’ and that ‘Tuke may well have used the ground floor for seeing mental patients.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Cook to Thomas, 25 November 1879. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Cook to Thomas, 26 November 1879. *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald* reported that ‘the coffin was deposited in the grave in which Mr. Dickens’s infant child Dora was buried many years ago, and which has not been reopened since. It lies in one of the most retired and beautiful spot in the cemetery.’ *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald* (Bury Saint Edmunds, England), Tuesday, December 02, 1879; pg. 2; Issue 5084. *British Library Newspapers, Part II: 1800-1900*. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)