Chapter 3

ROBERT BUSS

Dickens's third illustrator, Robert Buss, also suffered from his association with the author, though less dramatically than George Cruikshank and Robert Seymour. Buss, hastily hired to replace Seymour as an illustrator for the *The Pickwick Papers*, was just as hastily dismissed—within a month in fact. To have missed fame by so slender a margin would have distressed any man; but to be forever remembered, if at all, as a failure in association with the most popular novel of the century was a fate Buss hardly deserved. Like Mrs. Seymour, Buss dwelt on these cruel ironies the rest of his life. Unlike the widow, however, he endured his misfortune in silence during Dickens's lifetime, and blamed the *Pickwick* publishers, not the author. When, shortly before his own death, he finally vented his indignation, he did so only privately to Forster. In fact Dickens, whom Buss never met, remained an inspiration to him throughout his frustrated career.

None of Dickens's illustrators revered him more than Buss (fig. 26). As a young artist, known for his portraits as well as book illustrations, Buss had admired Boz's first sketches in the *Morning Chronicle*. In 1836 he, like Seymour, even illustrated one of them when it appeared in Chapman and Hall's *Library of Fiction*; Seymour illustrated "The Tuggs's at Ramsgate," and Buss supplied the woodcut for "A Little Talk about Spring and Sweeps" (*SBB*, S, XX, facing p. 166). Chimney sweeps, as reflected in Blake's *Songs*, had acquired a romantic mystique during Dickens's youth. Their origins still provoked speculation and their boisterous dancing remained the only vestige of earlier May Day celebrations. Buss was fascinated by the legendary and sentimental aspects of Dickens's piece. Using straight and curving parallel lines, the artist portrayed the mythical sweeper who, kidnapped as a baby, falls asleep on his own infant bed when he is supposed to be working, and is


recognized by his mother (fig. 27). When the piece, renamed "The First of May," was reused in the second edition of the *Sketches by Boz* later in the year, Cruikshank found the vulgarity of the contemporary merrymaking more interesting and captured it with short, varied strokes (*SBB*, S, XX, facing p. 174) (fig. 28). The two scenes sum up the different
interests and techniques of the artists. That Buss's very first illustration for Dickens was so quickly replaced, however, anticipated the fate of his subsequent plates for the author.

Buss's engagement on *Pickwick*, like Dickens's own, resulted from his connection with the *Library of Fiction*. His May Day plate had been engraved on wood by John Jackson, whose brother had engraved Seymour's wrapper design for *Pickwick*. Jackson apparently was consulted by Chapman and Hall in their urgent search for an artist to succeed Seymour. The engraver, aware of the importance of illustrations to *Pickwick*’s survival, was stymied. Who would be available on such short notice? Who knew how to etch on steel, still a novelty, not the fashion it became after *Pickwick*? Cruikshank and Seymour were the only famous comic artists then capable of coping with steel plates; and even they, pressed for time, often resorted to assistance from engravers. Who was, in addition, familiar with young Dickens's work? The *Library* sketch in mind, Jackson thought of his friend Buss. Buss was familiar with Boz's work. He was steadier than Seymour and more tractable and available than the busy Cruikshank. True, Buss had never etched, though he was the son of an engraver, but he would learn quickly. Assistants could prepare the wax and resin ground and apply the tricky acids to “bite-in” his designs. Robert Buss, Jackson advised the publishers, would be a suitable successor to Robert Seymour.

Acting on Jackson's advice, Hall called on Buss, who was then working on a canvas for the forthcoming Royal Academy exhibit. The publisher's proposal that Buss "undertake the illustrations for the ensuing number of *Pickwick*" completely surprised the artist. He thought his etching inexperience a serious drawback. No, Hall apparently countered persuasively, any talented artist could easily learn the process. Of course, the publishers would show "due consideration" toward his lack of etching practice. Whether "due consideration" meant less stringent judgment of his work or more generous renumeration than
was usual was left unclear. It was also left vague whether Buss's tenure was for the "ensuing" number only or for as long as he gave satisfaction. Buss obviously assumed both that he would be well paid for his efforts and that he was likely to continue as Pickwick's illustrator throughout its publication. It was certainly clear to Buss that the publisher's plight was desperate and that his help would be invaluable. Pressed by Hall, flattered by Jackson's recommendation, awed by the reputation of his predecessor, and impressed by Dickens's writing, Buss agreed to submit a sample of his qualifications to follow Seymour.

Putting aside the Academy canvas with reluctance, Buss purchased the requisite etching tools and began an intensive period of rigorous self-training. Clearly thinking in terms of extended employment illustrating Pickwick and not just of the task at hand, he resolved to learn to etch. After studying Seymour's prints, Buss made pen and ink studies of the Pickwickians (fig. 29). Then, selecting an episode from the published second number, he drew Pickwick being forced back into the crowd by a soldier's musket at the Rochester review. Determined not to jeopardize the quality of his drawing by allowing a different hand to etch it, Buss spurned Jackson's offers of assistance and etched it himself. The novice attempted the impossible by trying to convey his accustomed bold effects of a woodcut while imitating Seymour's delicate lines. Weary from etching the steel, whose surface was so much harder (and therefore more durable) than that of copper or wood, Buss applied the "biting-in" acid only once. The result was predictably "thin and scratchy."  

Even if the publishers and Dickens shared Buss's low opinion of his sample, they faced a Hobson's choice. They could continue with Buss or produce an issue without any illustrations at all. Having already halved the number of illustrations, they dared not break faith still further with their readers, few as they were. The firm gave Buss the green light. They printed his name on the Pickwick wrapper and announced that the plates for the third number would be executed by "Mr. Buss—a gentleman already known to the public as a very humorous and talented artist."  

Fortunately, under the firm's "improved" plan, there were only two illustrations for Buss to prepare. Chapman and Hall had approved his sketches for two subjects: the Muggleton cricket match and the fat boy peeping at Tupman and Miss Wardle in the arbor. Again, Buss took great pains. First he studied Seymour's sketches for substance as well as style. Then he began to transfer the two designs to the single large steel plate from which they would be printed. He personally laid the wax and resin ground. But when he applied the etching needle to the surface, his inexperience became all too evident. The ill-prepared ground broke up under the needle's action. Buss did not have time to cancel the plate and re-etch it. He had to give his designs to an expert to etch them (though, oddly, notations on both printed plates say they were "Drawn and Etched by R. W. Buss"). As a result of this necessary intercession of another hand, however, the published illustrations lacked the freer, firmer touch of Buss's drawings.

The Pickwick principals had no choice at this late date but to utilize Buss's plates; they could not afford to reveal their true opinion at that time. Though Buss, in retrospect, felt fairly satisfied with 'The Cricket Match' (VII, facing p. 90), his employers obviously did not. They probably found the figures oversized and angular, their poses stiff, and their expressions too uniformly open-mouthed or vacant. In any case, at their earliest opportunity they replaced not only the design but the entire subject. The 'Arbour Scene' was more to their liking (VIII, facing p. 98). By moving the fat boy from behind the amorous couple (fig. 30) to the front in a direct confrontation with them (fig. 31), Buss extracted as much comic potential from the situation as possible. But the publishers and author seem to have shared the artist's later
disparagement of its cramped lines and unsubtle use of light
and shadow (fig. 32)—even the first letter of his signature
was improperly reversed—for they had Browne redesign it
completely soon after he replaced Buss on Pickwick (fig. 33;
 cf. fig. 34). Yet Pickwick's dwindling readership did not
complain about Seymour's successor nor was he criticized by
its few reviewers. One paper, one of the few even to note the
new artist, declared of Boz and Buss that “the operation of
the two will banish 'black melancholy' as effectually as a dose
of laughing gas.”7 Indeed, nearly twenty years later, the fat
boy's revelations to old Mrs. Wardle about the antics in the
arbor (VIII, 102-3) would so amuse the young James
Whistler that he felt compelled to draw the scene (fig. 34).8

As it turned out, however, only Buss was banished. The
unsuspecting artist assumed that the mere appearance of his
plates indicated the publisher's tacit approval. With added
confidence, reflected in the firmer draftsmanship, if not the
continued expressionlessness, of all his Pickwicks (see figs.
19, 20, 29), he sketched two designs for the fourth number
and even went so far as to design one for Pickwick's title
page in anticipation of its later publication in hardcover.9 He
then returned to work on his Academy canvas while he
waited to be given a deadline for the finished plates. He
never was. While he waited, another artist submitted
samples more impressive than his own in application for the
post he held so tenuously. Buss knew nothing of this
challenger until the publishers curtly notified him that “they
had placed the work in the hands of Mr. Hablot Browne!”10

Buss was flabbergasted. He was keenly aware of the
defects of his first etchings, but thought them as good as
could be expected. Three weeks practice could not remedy
his inexperience at etching his own drawings or at accommo­
dating them to an expert etcher's hand, but one more month
might have. He had assumed that the Pickwick principals
tacitly shared his opinions. How could he have so misjudged
them? Granted, the publishers had asked him to illustrate
only one Pickwick number. But, almost certainly, the artist
felt they had broken an implicit agreement to engage him
permanently. Lacking witnesses or a written contract, of
course, he could have proven nothing, had he wanted to fight
for the job. His own strenuous efforts suggest that he did
not regard his Pickwick assignment as a passing thing nor
even a welcome opportunity to add etching to his repertoire
of skills. “Is it reasonable to suppose,” queried his oldest
son, “that he would have consented to devote three weeks of
his time, at the most valuable season to an artist, to the
practice of an entirely new department of art, if it had been
clearly stated that his engagement” was only temporary?11

Clearly Buss did not know another illustrator would be

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Fig. 30 (opposite, top left). Robert Buss, Unpublished Sketch for 'The fat boy awake on this occasion only.' Graphite with some pen and brown ink. 6¼" × 4¾" (15.4 × 11.6 cm) [sight]. By permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library. Fig. 31 (opposite, top right). Robert Buss, Unpublished Final Sketch for 'The fat boy awake on this occasion only.' Graphite. 6¼" × 4¾" (15.4 × 11.6 cm) [sight]. By permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library. Fig. 32 (opposite, bottom left). Robert Buss, 'The fat boy awake on this occasion only.' The Pickwick Papers, no. 3. Etching. 4¾" × 3¾" (12.2 × 9.1 cm). From the Harry Elkins Widener Collection, by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Fig. 33 (opposite, bottom right). Hablot Browne, 'The fat boy awake on this occasion only.' The Pickwick Papers, 1st ed., 2d issue (1837), facing p. 74. Etching. 5½" × 4½" (14 × 10.8 cm). From the Harry Elkins Widener Collection, by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Fig. 34 (above). James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Unpublished Sketch of Mrs. Wardle and the fat boy, ca. 1854. Watercolor. 8¼" × 6½" (20.6 × 14.2 cm) [sight]. By permission of Chester M. Sawtelle.
sought, never mind found, so quickly. His chagrin naturally deepened with Pickwick's unprecedented success, which began within a month of his summary dismissal.

Certainly the publishers treated Buss very callously. After so vigorously soliciting his help, they dismissed him without a word of thanks. Buss found their idea of remuneration miserly. Did Chapman and Hall seriously think a “beggarly” thirty shillings adequate compensation for the time spent on his Pickwick work—time lost on the Academy canvas? Was this “due consideration”? The artist kept his hurt indignation to himself for many years. He manifested his frustration at this time mainly by locking up his etching tools and destroying many of his papers relating to Pickwick. For the rest of his life, he could not bear to have the matter mentioned in his presence.

Chapman and Hall's behavior to Buss was shrewd enough, but morally vulnerable. It is unclear whether the firm actually intended to use Buss just for the one number but allowed him to anticipate a permanent position on Pickwick only to secure his services, or whether they planned to keep him. In either case, their vagueness facilitated a natural counterclaim: that Buss had been on trial and found unsatisfactory. Had they liked his work, they probably would not, in fact, have hired a younger, more obscure artist like Hablot Browne, despite his greater etching experience. Still, after seeing Buss's first poor sample etching, they should, in all decency, either have dismissed him with compensation, openly indicated their dissatisfaction, or decided to stand by him until he perfected his etching technique.

Business exigencies, however, doubtless superseded such genteel considerations. Despite Buss's contempt for the sum, the firm had taken his difficulties into account to some extent, for it paid him at almost the same rate as Seymour. Furthermore, at the moment when Buss was hired, the publishers were frantic. Their Pickwick investment, a considerable one for a young firm, threatened to yield a heavy loss. Since Pickwick's success was still thought to depend on the plates rather than the text, poor illustrations were better than none. Pressures of time prevented more advance notice to Buss or to the public of Browne's engagement. Ironically, Pickwick's diminutive audience, their real object of concern, hardly noticed all the changes of artist; and later readers were to know nothing at all of Buss's two contributions.

Dickens's role in the hiring and firing of Buss is surprisingly obscure. He apparently never met or communicated with his second Pickwick artist, despite their mutual friends, William Macready, the actor, and Clarkson Stanfield, the artist and later Dickens illustrator. Contrary to what became his usual procedure, Dickens stayed behind the scenes and let the publishers carry on all transactions with Buss. They, not the author, looked at his sample plate, approved his proposed designs, forwarded proof, and terminated his engagement. They kept Dickens informed, of course; not to do so might have incurred his anger and insured the artist's discomfort had he been allowed to continue. But the author's uncharacteristic aloofness suggests his utter indifference to this illustrator who he seems to have realized was temporary, though Buss did not. Had Dickens found the artist's work promising, he doubtless would have supervised every aspect of it as he later did that of Browne. Knowing Buss to be a stopgap, perhaps, the author left him to the firm's mercy, tacitly acquiescing in their dealings. Meanwhile, he devoted his spare time to interviewing other artists for Pickwick. Buss, ignorant of this duplicity, never blamed Dickens for his misfortune. On the contrary, he came to worship the author from afar.

Buss's reaction to his rude dissociation from Dickens differed in kind and degree from that of Cruikshank and of Seymour's family; the brief experience also had a permanent effect on him, although this was not immediately evident. Indeed, in the period just after his Pickwick failure, his hurt pride received considerable solace, though it proved to be temporary. He finished and sold his Academy canvas to high acclaim by the critics. Even more gratifying in the face of his Pickwick rejection, he was soon commissioned to provide etchings for books by Mrs. Trollope and Captain Marryat. "The illustrations are by 'Buss,' a young man of great talent," wrote the Observer about the former work; "George Cruikshank must look to his laurels." Whereas Pickwick was, at the time he was illustrating it, an obscure work by a young journalist working for a new firm, these were books by two of the most popular authors of the day and their publisher, Henry Colburn, was eminent. These successes, however, only reminded him of how narrowly he had missed immortality with Dickens and confirmed his belief in Chapman and Hall's mistreatment of him. If he had only had another fortnight, he thought, with justification, he might have made the grade.

Ironically, Buss did get another chance to impress Dickens but again failed to do so. Early in 1837 he engraved a picture called 'The Spectre of Tappington' from a drawing by R. H. Barham's son to illustrate one of the elder Barham's Ingoldsby Legends, which appeared in Bentley's Miscellany, then edited by Dickens. Buss never knew that his idol thought he had treated a "very good subject" in a "very indifferent manner." But he must have noticed that, by the end of 1837, all his Dickens illustrations—the one for Boz's Library sketch and the two for Pickwick—had been
replaced and his name omitted from the title page of the first bound edition of *Pickwick*. Scant evidence remained that Buss had ever illustrated Dickens at all.

As Dickens's prosperity soared, Buss's diminished. Throughout the following decades, as if proving that his *Pickwick* rejection had been unwarranted, or sharing vicariously in Browne's success, Buss portrayed scenes or characters from *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Chimes*, and *Dombey and Son* for exhibitions. Dickens took no particular notice of these independent representations, which were only a few of the many his fiction inspired. After the inexplicable exclusion of his canvases from the Royal Academy exhibitions after 1854, Buss, no longer fully able to support his family by painting or book illustration, supplemented his precarious income by teaching, editing, lecturing, and writing about art. Meanwhile, in 1850, his wife and distinguished daughter, Frances, to whom he was particularly close, had founded a pioneering school for women, in which Buss began to teach branches of science as well as of art. In marked contrast to the Seymours, however, he never solicited Dickens's help. Indeed, the artist's admiration for the author seemed to intensify as their positions became more disparate.

Long after the *Pickwick* affair, Buss remained uncomfortable whenever his name was publicly connected with the book. He himself said nothing until 1871, a year after Dickens's death, when he read the first volume of Forster's *Life*. Referring to the problems of *Pickwick* after Seymour's suicide, Forster noted: "There was at first a little difficulty in replacing him, and for a single number Mr. Buss was interposed. But before the fourth number a choice had been made." The official biographer's small but slighting reference revived Buss's grievances. When he retrieved and looked at his *Pickwick* etchings, he found them less inferior than he had remembered. Indeed their figures, which were relatively large and naturalistic, better suited the tastes of the 1870's than the 1830's, which had favored the grotesque, and diminutive. After almost forty years, Buss was still certain that he had been mistreated by Chapman and Hall, and he wanted justice at last.

The artist decided to write Forster. More in sorrow than in anger, he explained the pressurized circumstances of his *Pickwick* connection. His arguments, unlike many of George Cruikshank or the Seymours, were neither petty nor libelous. In fact, he lavishly praised Dickens, Seymour, and Browne as well as Forster, and blamed only the publishers. By his generosity to so many others, he gained sympathy—and credibility—for himself. Not surprisingly, Forster's reply was cordial. He had not intended to slight Buss, he said; he had simply been ignorant of the facts. Forster promised to right matters in the next edition of the *Life*, but he did not live long enough to do so and Buss did not live long enough to have read it even if he had.

Buss, however, was not concerned with justice only in his lifetime or for himself. Though satisfied that Forster understood his plight, he could not let the issue rest. His anxiety stemmed only partly from the lost opportunity, the value of which hindsight had so painfully revealed. He had been aggrieved even when everyone involved with *Pickwick* faced greater chances of bankruptcy than of immortality. Even more upsetting to Buss in his old age was the prospect that the positive achievements of his long career seemed condemned to be forever overshadowed by his fleeting *Pickwick* failure. As a parent, as well as an artist, he felt obligated to leave his children a complete account of the association.

"My Connexion with *The Pickwick Papers*," completed by Buss on March 2, 1872, but not published until 1936, is a curiously appealing document. The artist devotes only one-third of the statement to his own case, which convincingly, if repetitiously, stresses his trials with the etching process and his shoddy treatment at the hands of the publishers. Buss gains some historical perspective and moral credibility by devoting equal space to the two other *Pickwick* illustrators. His sympathetic biographical account of Seymour is filled with inaccuracies perpetuated by that family, but free of their bias against Dickens; in elaborating Seymour's etching difficulties, he is, of course, describing his own as well. Inevitably his discussion of Hablot Browne, his successor, is more strained. But when he discusses Browne's advantages—the support of the publishers and the appearance of the richly comic Sam Weller—his envy is engaging in its openness. Moreover, he is sincere in his admiration of Browne's comic abilities—and of their substantial contribution to Dickens's own popularity. This private statement only partly consoled Buss's heirs, who tended to view him as a neglected genius, were repeatedly annoyed by public recollections of their father only as the unsuccessful *Pickwick* illustrator, and tried to counteract them. They were hardly gratified when time validated yet another of Buss's predictions—that book collectors would come to prize the rare copies of *Pickwick* that contained his two etchings.

Had Dickens lived after 1870, he would have been surprised by the continued homage—a sharp contrast to the heightened vituperations of Cruikshank—of the illustrator he knew least. In his 1874 history of *English Graphic Satire*,

Robert Buss 57
for example, Buss praised Dickens's moral accomplishments throughout and even gratuitously included details about his life and taste. When Dickens died, Buss, now elderly and ailing himself, decided to paint the author asleep in his library chair at Gad’s Hill, dreaming of his fictitious characters. Foreseeing that he might not live to complete the ambitious subject, Buss quickly modeled the setting after Fildes’s famous picture, 'The Empty Chair' (see fig. 199), copied the principal figure from John Watkins’s famous photograph of Dickens, borrowed, perhaps, the composition from a well-known reverie by Cruikshank, and completed a few of the characters from Dickens’s later novels. The earlier creations, still in outline when the artist died on February 26, 1875, inadvertently added to the dreamlike appearance of the canvas (fig. 35). This final unsolicited tribute to Dickens, appropriately unfinished as was the author’s own last work, came to be called 'Dickens’s Dream.' A suitable subtitle would be ‘Buss’s Dream’ for now, at last, he had illustrated many of the author’s major characters. In this creative way, Buss tried to overcome, if not obliterate, the painful reality of his short-lived association with Dickens.

Fig. 35. Robert Buss, ‘Dickens’s Dream.’ Watercolor. 27” × 36” (68.6 × 91.4 cm) [sight]. From the Tyrrell Collection, by courtesy of the Trustees of the Dickens House Museum.