Chapter 6

SAMUEL WILLIAMS

Samuel Williams has not even been recognized as one of Dickens's illustrators until recently. However, he was well-known in Victorian publishing circles, if not to the public at large, as an engraver who could also design. For example, he not only engraved four of the illustrations provided by Browne and Cattermole for Master Humphrey's Clock but designed as well as executed the famous scene of little Nell asleep in her bedroom (OCS, I, 14) (see fig. 128).\(^1\) Williams was the only one of Dickens's artists ever to perform both these tasks. Though his tenure as designer proved even briefer than that of Robert Buss, Williams's single illustration of Nell had a greater demonstrable impact on the author than any other provided for his work.

Williams was born in 1788 in the small Essex market town of Colchester. Like most of Dickens's original illustrators, he displayed precocious artistic talent, but family circumstances did not permit him to receive formal training. Instead, he was apprenticed to a local printer named Marsden, who tried to force his skills into mechanical channels.\(^2\) Williams's inclinations, like Hablot Browne's, could not be curbed, though he followed them in his spare time, not on the job; indeed, like Miss La Creevy in Nickleby, he used to wake at dawn to pursue the "fine arts" (NN, V, 44) of painting and wood engraving.\(^3\)

Using techniques revived and popularized by Thomas Bewick, Williams soon became proficient enough at both designing and engraving on wood to make these skills the basis of the business he established after his unhappy apprenticeship concluded. He quickly found work, first in Colchester and then in London.\(^4\) Employers were eager to secure his dual talents. Williams had sufficient commissions to design and engrave illustrations on popular editions, such as Whittington's Robinson Crusoe in 1822 and Scott's Bible in 1831–32, to warrant training other members of his family to assist him. His brother Thomas and sister Mary Ann became respected engravers and artists in their own right; and his four sons later carried on the collective enterprise. The Williamses, along with the Thompsons, became the leading families of engravers by the late 1830's.\(^5\)

Like Seymour and Buss before him, Williams found little time to pursue his own painting (which specialized in rural scenes) as his family and business expanded.\(^6\) He continued, therefore, to be better known for his contributions to the works of others than for his own. His lack of public reputation was not helped by Mary Howitt's condescending remarks after her brother William worked closely with the artist on the two dozen woodcuts provided for his Rural Lives of England in 1838: "He is a man of a curious mind, not apt in originating ideas, but quick and frequently very happy in working them out when they are suggested. He has, in his happiest designs, worked under William's eye and hand like an obedient child, and has produced some of the very best designs that have appeared in wood since the days of Bewick."\(^7\) Williams, hardly devoid of initiative, doubtless knew by this time how to defer to employers. This ability served him well in illustrating for Dickens.

Williams was one of the hands employed, probably by Chapman and Hall, to engrave some of the numerous designs to be "dropped" into the text of Dickens's first periodical, Master Humphrey's Clock.\(^8\) The author and his publishers naturally thought of him after deciding to use wood engravings rather than etchings for their ease of printing and placement because, as was later observed, Williams was "the first to give to periodical literature spirited and good illustrations" in this medium, often used in commercial but not imaginative work.\(^9\) Accordingly, he engraved Cattermole's illustrations of Master Humphrey's
room for the Clock's debut (SBB, 699) and Browne's portrayal of the correspondent for the second number (SBB, 728). He probably was to engrave the second design for the fourth number in which the Nell story, then self-contained, appeared. Browne was to furnish the design; "any subject he fancies," Dickens had instructed, but "it should have the girl in it, that's all." It is not known why Browne did not supply this drawing nor whether Cattermole, who had provided the number's headpiece, was approached and declined. With the pressure of the weekly as well as the monthly Clock schedule, the principals could lose no time in finding another artist.

Samuel Williams was the logical choice. It seems likely that he was not thought of merely as a stopgap, as Robert Buss may have been on Pickwick, but as a permanent Clock illustrator. Chapman and Hall would save time and perhaps money employing Williams, who could both design and execute his engravings, in contrast to Cattermole, who could not yet copy his own drawings onto the wood block, or Browne, who had no time or desire to do his own engraving. Furthermore, Dickens had wanted his periodical illustrated by a variety of artists. Browne could not take on more work; Cattermole, given his painting and his nervousness, could not be overtaxed; and Maclise had declined to participate on any regular basis, finally being cajoled into providing one design. Williams, with his varied skills and experience, could cope with any subject likely to arise in the miscellany. Dickens apparently thought he was hired for the Clock's duration to judge from the conclusion of his first instructions: "As Mr. Dickens hopes to communicate with Mr. Williams on many future occasions, he will not weary him with any apology for these remarks just now." There is no suggestion that this first written communication from author to artist would be the last.

Dickens had arranged to meet Williams at Devonshire Terrace to inspect his sketch for Nell in bed but when he was unable to keep the appointment, he sent a detailed set of stringent instructions instead. Using his most objective third-person manner, as he often did when addressing strangers, the author commented:

The object being to shew the child in the midst of a crowd of uncongenial and ancient things, Mr. Dickens scarcely feels the very pretty drawing inclosed, as carrying out his ideas: the room being to all appearances . . . exceedingly comfortable . . . and the sleeper being in a very enviable condition. If the composition would admit of a few grim, ugly articles seen through a doorway beyond, for instance, and giving the notion of great gloom outside the little room and surrounding the chamber, it would be much better. The figure on the bed is not sufficiently childish and would perhaps look better without a cap, and with the hair floating over the pillows. The last paragraph of the paper (which perhaps Mr. Williams has) expresses Mr. Dickens's idea better than he can convey it in any other words.

Williams acted on Dickens's suggestions as readily as he doubtless had on Howitt's. Nell's face and form may still appear more womanly than childish to the viewer (I, 14) (fig. 128), but it is compatible with Cattermole's graceful portrayal of her awake (I, 1); indeed, the artist seems to have taken pains to insure continuity of his colleague's delicate style as well as their mutual subject, though Dickens had not stressed this. Nell's fair hair spreads with appealing naturalism over the pillow as the author had wished. The semi-canopied bed still appears comfortable, even luxurious, but its rounded solidity well points up the angularity and disrepair of the "grim, ugly articles" mentioned in Dickens's text (I, 14) and in his letter. Williams incorporated all these objects within the room, not beyond it, wisely recognizing the spirit rather than the letter of the author's instructions. The ghostly suits of armor and the wood and stone faces were delineated just as Dickens described them together with other disparate items that he had not—chairs, pictures, mirrors, statuary, and even a crucifix. Finally, Williams's use of bright whiteness to portray the bed and sleeping girl, in vivid contrast to the dark tones of most of her surroundings, further isolates Nell visually, just as she has been verbally—"alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay" (I, 14). Whether or not William

Fig. 128. Samuel Williams, 'Nell in bed.' Master Humphrey's Clock, no. 4, p. 46. Wood engraving. 3¾" × 4½" (8 × 11.5 cm). By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
Linton was right in thinking the artist generally overdependent on such brilliant contrast for effect, certainly it is effectively suitable to this Dickens piece; for when it expanded into The Old Curiosity Shop, it relied heavily on traditional oppositions of light and dark.  

The hope of such collaboration, that a scene will remain in the readers’ minds, even over an extended period, was realized here beyond expectation. Thomas Hood, writing anonymously in the Athenaeum in 1840, called the public’s attention to Williams’s illustration: “Look at the Artist’s picture of the Child, asleep in her little bed, surrounded, or rather mobbed, by ancient armour, and arms, antique furniture, and relics sacred or profane, hideous or grotesque:—it is like an allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world.” Dickens was certainly gratified by Hood’s perceptions of both his original purpose in the Nell story and his intentions after it became a full-scale novel—perhaps these perceptions were clearer than his own. He manifested his pleasure in numerous ways.  

First, Dickens sought the reviewer’s identity and, after discovering it, wrote to express his appreciation. He would also thank Hood publicly in his preface to the 1848 Cheap Edition of The Old Curiosity Shop (vii). In 1841, however, Dickens must have displayed marked enthusiasm about the Athenaeum review to Forster. For as Harvey has demonstrated, Forster accordingly referred to Williams’s engraving in his own anonymous review for the Examiner late that year, which was recycled with scant alteration in his biography of Dickens three decades later: “In the first still picture of Nell’s innocence in the midst of strange and alien forms, we have the forecast of her after-wanderings, her patient miseries, her sad maturity of experiences before its time.”  

Furthermore, at this time, Dickens made some additions to the text that seem to endorse implicitly Hood’s interpretation of his thinking. These additions were necessary to replace the Master Humphrey sections that were removed from the Nell story for its separate publication in 1841. Dickens’s four new paragraphs, inserted right below the Williams engraving and before his own original concluding paragraph, further reinforce the significance of the illustration as Hood had perceived it, even, as Harvey notes, echoing some of his phrases. Dickens’s longest addition also may contain an unconscious acknowledgment of Williams’s contribution in immortalizing little Nell. For readers, like the narrator, certainly possessed her “image without any effort of imagination,” not only in their minds but before their eyes as well (1, 13). Surely Dickens realized what both Hood and Forster imply, that The Old Curiosity Shop retrospectively seemed as much an expansion of Williams’s illustration as of Dickens’s prose.  

Williams may have accomplished his task too well, however, and inadvertently deprived himself of a more lasting engagement as a Dickens illustrator. When the Clock’s mixed format proved unacceptable to readers, the Nell piece developed into a novel along the lines of contrast that both author and artist took such pains to reinforce in ‘Little Nell in bed.’ The principals must have realized that further graphic variety was no longer necessary or desirable. The picturesque and the grotesque, whose opposition structured the narrative, were precisely the styles in which Cattermole and Browne respectively excelled. Surely this pair could meet the challenges of continuity without another hand’s help. Moreover, the Clock’s precariousness may have necessitated financial retrenchment; if so, Williams, as the last to be hired, would be the first to be let go.  

How this message was conveyed to Williams and how he received it is not recorded. More solidly established in his craft than Buss was at the time of his Pickwick severance, Williams probably accepted his reversion to his earlier status as a Clock engraver with equanimity. He executed two more Master Humphrey designs by Cattermole (SBB, 758) and Browne (SBB, 789) with his customary competence, and then concentrated his energies on prestigious commissions such as the one to engrave the scenes for the Abbotsford Edition of Scott’s Waverley novels (1842–47) and on works whose illustrations he himself designed. His prospering firm maintained its connection with Dickens over the years. Samuel’s brother, Thomas Williams, engraved eleven of the Christmas book illustrations in the mid-1840’s—indeed, Maclise was furious to discover that Thompson rather than Williams was executing his opening designs for The Battle of Life in 1846. Thomas Williams also executed the frontispiece for the 1848 edition of the Shop, whose preface contained Dickens’s thanks to Hood for what, in large part, was an appreciation of his brother’s contribution to the original work (vii).  

Whether the author and his publishers would have employed Samuel Williams’s dual skills again cannot be known. Subsequent illustrations for Dickens’s novels for the next two decades were etchings. By the time the author again used wood engravings for his illustrations, in Our Mutual Friend in 1864 and The Mystery of Edwin Drood in 1870, Samuel Williams was dead. Yet the reason for Dickens’s return to wood engraving was part of the Williams legacy in this medium, whose standards he and his family had so long upheld. His work had helped to continue the
popular dissemination of wood engraving after Bewick's death, even when it was unfashionable or difficult to do so, and had encouraged an atmosphere in which this medium, aided by technical advances, would become the dominant one in the illustration of fiction after 1860. At the time of Williams's death in 1853, at least one contemporary felt that current book illustration owed its "chief force and character" to his efforts. And the Athenaeum felt little doubt that "whenever the history of wood-engraving in the country shall again be written, the name of Mr. Samuel Williams will be mentioned with honour." The same name, though devoid of legend, anecdotes, an extant likeness, or even many verifiable facts, also deserves honorable mention in any account of Dickens's original illustrators.