

<b>Institution:</b> University of York		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 27 - English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Dickens in Public		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> Jan 2005 – Dec 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor John Bowen	Professor of Victorian Literature	01/01/2005 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>John Bowen is a leading and influential scholar of Dickens and other Victorian authors. He is a sought-after commentator on literary culture, has produced archival finds that have garnered global attention, and his collaborations with major institutions have informed artistic practice, shaped major curatorial projects and inspired teachers. His research has enhanced the understanding of large audiences in the UK, US and China, and has had a global reach. Bowen's work with the British Library and the V&amp;A, and his formative contribution to theatrical adaptations for the Royal Shakespeare Company are key examples of this sustained, international and multi-dimensional impact.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Bowen's research over more than twenty-five years has explored the subtlety, strangeness and radicalism of a major literary author who is also an iconic national figure with a wide popular audience. In influential articles and chapters, it has shown how the biographical [3.1, 3.3, 3.5], fictional [3.1, 3.2, 3.4] and fractured historical [3.1, 3.5] evidence of Dickens's life and work can be creatively mobilised to understand his work in fresh and challenging ways. Interpretively, it breaks decisively from more reductive biographical and textual interpretations [3.1, 3.4] and understandings, and its archival discoveries [3.5] have had a transformative effect both on scholarly and popular understanding. Bowen's work has been strongly committed simultaneously to exploring neglected aspects and dimensions of Dickens's work [3.1, 3.4]; to affirming his status as a popular author; and to transmitting that understanding to wide-ranging, often new, audiences around the world. It is committed to maintaining both the unsettling and radical qualities of Dickens's work and its ability to speak to a range of diverse audiences about some of the most urgent questions of modernity [3.1, 3.4]. Bowen's research has mutually-informing archival, interpretive and biographical dimensions, and is informed by sophisticated literary theory. His more recent work has four particular emphases: on the complex relation of the 'biographical' and 'textual' in Dickens's life and writing [3.5]; on his revisionary use of the Gothic mode [3.4]; on the cross-cultural and international aspects of his work [3.2]; and on the need to pioneer new ways to bring scholarly knowledge and popular understandings together, using innovative digital technology. His work has a strong commitment to wide, international popular understandings, to working closely and inventively with libraries, museums and media organisations, and to dialogue with ambitious creative practice. In some fifty articles and chapters on Dickens and related authors and contexts, along with both scholarly and popular editions and the creation of digital and online resources, Bowen brings academic work that is ambitious in its conceptual, archival and interpretive dimensions into creative dialogue with a wide range of readers and popular understandings. His work includes ground-breaking discoveries which have garnered major international press coverage, and made significant changes in public perceptions of Dickens. In particular, his discovery of evidence in unpublished letters of Dickens's attempt to have his wife consigned to an asylum, published in full scholarly form in <i>The Dickensian</i>, and briefer in <i>Times Literary Supplement</i>, received enormous global media coverage [3.5]. His scholarly publications on, for example, Dickens's Christmas Books, his biography, literary professionalism and the complex reworking of Gothic motifs and tropes in his fiction underpin Bowen's many popular articles and videos, widely used by teachers. The importance of gothic motifs and the complex relation of biography and literary interpretation also informs his work on Charlotte and Emily Bronte [3.6], which have influenced both educational and creative practice. Bowen's <i>Other Dickens</i> and <i>Palgrave Advances</i> volumes have each been</p>		

cited as among the 'Five Best Books' on Dickens, on the respected Smithsonian.com and fivebooks.com websites, respectively.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 'Uncanny gifts, strange contagion: allegory in Dickens's *The Haunted Man*' in *Contemporary Dickens* eds. Deirdre David and Eileen Gillooly (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009) 75-92. [review comments include: "right on target ... fresh, alive, and interesting" - Shale Preston; "Bowen's subtle analysis ... high seriousness and a light touch" - Cora Kaplan.]
- 3.2 Charles Dickens: 'Englishman and European' in *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*, ed. Michael Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 209-226, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521515047.014>.
- 3.3 'Chapter 1 and 2: The Life of Dickens 1 and 2' in *Dickens in Context*, eds. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 3-17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975493>.
- 3.4 'Charles Dickens and the Gothic' in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic volume II: Gothic in the Nineteenth Century* eds. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 246-64.
- 3.5 'Madness and the Dickens Marriage: a new source', *Dickensian*, 507, vol. 115, 1, Spring 2019, 5-20, <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/145783/>. [submitted to REF2021]
- 3.6 'The Brontes and the Transformations of Romanticism' in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 3: the Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880* eds. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 203-19.

Bowen's work is published by major university presses and peer reviewed.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Bowen's impact has been extensive and multi-dimensional, with creative, curatorial and educational, as well as digital innovation dimensions. It has had international reach and has reshaped popular understandings of Dickens's life and work. Major institutional beneficiaries of his research include the **Royal Shakespeare Company** (RSC, 2017-20), **British Library** (BL, 2017-), and the **Victoria and Albert Museum** (V&A, 2016-).

#### Curatorial, Educational and Creative Impact: British Library.

Bowen's research on Dickens's relation to the Gothic and Christmas books led to an important relationship with the **British Library**, which aided its unparalleled manuscript and print collections to reach large national and international audiences. Bowen has played a leading role in the development of BL's '**Discovering Literature**', a major new web resource with wide national and international reach, nominated by Slate magazine as one of '2014's Most Compelling Digital History Exhibits and Archives' [5.1c]. As a founding member of the Advisory Board (since 2012) and long-term collaborator with library staff, his role in the project has been formative. He has personally contributed many articles and videos based on his scholarly research about Dickens, the Gothic, Emily Bronte and other writers. As of June 2018, 10% of all BL videos accessed were those produced by Bowen, and his role in developing and publicising 'Discovering Literature' at events at the BL and in Manchester (March 2017) played a major part in its success. The development of 'Discovering Literature' has been central to the BL's online strategy and has provided new ways for teachers and broader publics to access literary material [5.1a]. Bowen's articles and videos, together with others', have been translated into Mandarin to coincide with a large exhibition at the **National Library of China**, Beijing [5.1b]. The chief executive's introduction to the 2017-18 BL annual report notes that 'The warm response from Chinese audiences to iconic Library treasures, including Dickens, Bronte, and Conan Doyle manuscripts, has been an inspiring illustration of the power of culture in forging new relationships across the globe' [5.1b]. Videos have been adopted by ABC Splash (Australia) and the Victoria State government's Education website. Bowen's contributions were highlighted in a feature in *The Hindu* (India) [5.1d]. This has also led to new **creative practice**. Bowen's writing on Emily Bronte and romanticism for the 'Discovering Literature', based on his research for the *Oxford History of the Novel* inspired new work by the composer Claire Roberts. 'Strange and Wild / Remote and Unfamiliar'. The first performance was at Leeds Minster (November 2018) by

leading trumpeter Simon Desbrulais and the Clothworkers' Consort, introduced by Bowen, as part of the 2018 Emily Bronte bicentenary. Roberts noted that the 'combination of historical and biographical context [in Bowen's article] alongside descriptive passages from the novel got lots of ideas flowing for a new piece of music' [5.2].

**Schools** and teachers are a major audience for 'Discovering Literature'. Bowen's video work, both for the BL and for **Massolit**, who produce UK curriculum-linked humanities educational material for schools, has reached and influenced large audiences across the UK and beyond, with over 5,000 views, and being among the 'Top 50' out of several thousand courses [5.3]. A Head of English in a secondary school wrote to Bowen to 'say thank you for your Massolit series on A Christmas Carol! ....It is a simple but transformative conceptualising of the text that I can't wait to share with my pupils when I next teach it' [5.3].

The reach of this work is also international. Bowen's long-term relationship with, and leading role in, the University of California Dickens Project (of which he was co-Director between 2013 and 2016) has led to a pioneering collaboration with the University of Southern California Neighbourhood Academic Initiative to reach under-served schools in South Los Angeles. In 2018 he was a video 'reading buddy' for '**Litlab**' for senior high school students at the James A. Foshay Learning Centre, Los Angeles. In this year-long project based around Bowen's Penguin edition of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*, students responded in more than 100 online comments and questions to Bowen's edition and new video introduction. Student responses included: '[your] video ... allowed me to step back and deeply take into consideration what I was reading and what the value of the book is'; 'it astounds me how you have thoroughly impacted my literary knowledge and aspirations ... Your masterful explanations allowed me to rethink my entire perception of the story' [5.4].

#### **Creative practice: a major new adaptation by the RSC.**

Dickens's place in the national consciousness is in part mediated by adaptations of his works. Bowen collaborated, as expert advisor, with the **RSC** for its widely lauded version of *A Christmas Carol* (2017-18 and 2018-19 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon), a role that was formative to its creative process and artistic practice. Its author-adaptor, the playwright **David Edgar**, reports that the shape and content of the play were directly and closely influenced by Bowen's expertise and research, noting that his 'arguments about the collective character of benevolence ... did much to shape the second half of the play' [5.5]. Bowen's sustained engagement with and impact on the artistic process entailed many meetings and discussions with Edgar, and a number of cast workshops, which helped shape understanding of roles. Feedback from these sessions included comments noting the 'invaluable knowledge' that 'only someone of John's breadth of scholarship can offer' [5.5]. In particular, Edgar notes a two-day workshop that fleshed out for him the 'socio-economic background of the novel' and the 'context of the political thinking' of the 1840s [5.5]. Edgar noted in a speech that the production was 'inspired by John Bowen's wonderful book on early Dickens'. Cast members commented on how Bowen's input ('like a human encyclopaedia') enhanced their understanding of the biographical, social and political background [5.5]; the effects are evident across the reviews in the national media (e.g. *Financial Times* review on Scrooge as 'a personification of the grasping social system') and in such audience responses as 'this performance really brought out Dickens' visceral anger about the treatment of the poor in Victorian Britain in a way which resonated with the treatment of the needy in today's society' (*The Guardian* public comments) [5.6]. This direct and extensive impact on its creative practice and artistic vision was matched by the production's public attention and acclaim. With an **audience of more than 100,000** for its two runs [5.5], it received excellent reviews, as 'intelligent and inventive' (*The Stage*); noteworthy for its 'politically charged ... social conscience' (*Evening Standard*), and overall 'a magnificent achievement' (*Daily Telegraph*) [5.6]. Bowen's essay for the programme was described by the director as an excellent introduction to the play in performance for tens of thousands of playgoers [5.5, 5.6]. The longevity of such academic-creative collaborations seems assured: in 2018, Bowen was invited by the **Royal National Theatre** (RNT) to lead a workshop for playwright Ben Power (Deputy Artistic Director, RNT), director Ian Rickson, and cast members towards a major new production commissioned by RNT of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, which is currently arrested by

the coronavirus crisis. Bowen, Rickson attests, 'made a very positive impact upon' the production and Power 'remember[s] with such joy our time with you in the OMF [*Our Mutual Friend*] workshop and the brilliant insights you brought us about Dickens and his fevered imagination as he was writing the book' [5.7].

### **Challenging popular perceptions and inspiring new creative practice through archival discovery.**

Bowen produces archival work that has attracted international attention, and brought the importance of the scholarly archive to public attention. His discovery of 94 unknown letters that demonstrated Dickens's attempt to have his wife put in an **asylum**, garnered attention in extensive articles and commentaries citing Bowen, in the *New York Times*, *Times* (London), *Times of India*, *El Pais*, *Daily Mail*, on BBC Radio 4 'The Moral Maze', and in press coverage in 29 countries, from Brazil to Vietnam, across five continents; it has been the spark for media discussion of gender inequality 'gaslighting' and celebrity privilege and reputation, in numerous guises. Total media coverage of the discovery has an estimated 6,450,000 views [5.8]. Bowen was interviewed about his discovery on the 'Today' programme (Radio 4) and the 'Moncrieff show' (Newstalk, Ireland). The Brightside video 'Why Catherine Dickens left her ten children and the writer' which features Bowen's research (and indeed a cartoon figure of him) has had more than 1,000,000 views on Youtube, and more than 2,750,000 in nine different language versions, including French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Polish. Other media appearances by Bowen talking about his research include BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* (28/7/17; 19/4/18), *Beyond Belief* (25/12/17; 14/5/18), *Front Row*, (15/6/18; 3/12/18) and the forthcoming Channel 5 TV series 'Britain and its Books' [5.8]. Bowen's discovery also contributed to **creative practice**, inspiring new interpretations of Dickens. A new production of *A Christmas Carol* in London in winter 2019-20 re-wrote Scrooge as a female character for the first time, in an attempt to 'get to the heart of what women in Victorian society were struggling against, and what we're still fighting against today'. The production's writer was inspired to create it specifically after reading the letters brought to public attention by Bowen's research [5.9].

### **Digital innovation at the V&A.**

In a further, innovative strand of mediating Dickens in new formats to new audiences, Bowen has co-led (with Douglas Dodds, Senior Curator, Word and Image Department, V&A) a major new project to make the museum's unparalleled collection of Dickens manuscripts, planning notes and proofs available in new online forms and to pioneer crowdsourced transcriptions of them. As 'undoubtedly one of the world's leading Dickens scholars', Bowen was 'the obvious choice' for the V&A to lead this project [5.10b]. Initiated in 2015 by Bowen and Professor Bill Sherman, then Head of VARI (V&A Research Institute), it entails the digital curation and deciphering of what is arguably the most important single-author archive in the language. While well-known to scholars, the extraordinary and unique archive of Dickens's creativity from conception to print has had no substantial public presence, despite the unique insight it gives into Dickens's creative process. 'Digital Dickens' will be a comprehensive, curated, accessible and integrated online resource with high resolution scans of manuscripts, proofs, published text and supporting material. A unique feature is the 'Deciphering Dickens' project in which members of the general public will collaboratively transcribe Dickens's manuscript deletions and revisions for the first time [5.10a]. During the development phase, 2016 to 2021, funded by the Mellon foundation, the digital transcription interface and software have been trialled at the Dickens Universe conference, University of California Santa Cruz in 2018 and 2019. The project was featured in the V&A annual report 2018-19 as an example of 'cutting-edge research ... piloting new ways in which digital technologies can make the V&A's collections more widely available to a global audience' [5.10c]. For Dodds, Bowen's 'knowledge and experience has proved to be invaluable for the development, implementation and outcomes of the Dickens project for the V&A' which 'has proved to be an excellent exemplar, informing and influencing the museum's policy and practices in innovative ways that extend far beyond the immediate focus of the initial research concepts.' Dodds confirms that the impact of Bowen's research will reach beyond this project itself, noting: 'Bowen's research has encouraged the museum to transform its methods of providing online access to literary and art-historical collections' [5.10b].

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)



- 5.1 (a) Testimonial email - Manager of Discovering Literature and Lead Producer for Digital Learning, British Library; (b) British Library Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18, p.4; (c) [Slate magazine nominations](#), 29 Dec 2014; (d) [ABC Splash](#); [The Hindu](#), 19 June 2015.
- 5.2 Testimonial email - Claire Roberts, composer.
- 5.3 Testimonial email - Founder and Director of MASSOLIT; testimonial - secondary school Head of English.
- 5.4 UCSC LitLab programme, Barnaby Rudge, [online discussion](#) between John Bowen and students.
- 5.5 Testimonial - David Edgar, *A Christmas Carol* Adapter, RSC and *A Christmas Carol* cast members; David Edgar speech, Dickens Fellowship Dinner, 7 February 2019; David Edgar email confirming audience numbers.
- 5.6 Portfolio of media reviews of RSC *A Christmas Carol*; RSC *A Christmas Carol* programme.
- 5.7 Testimonial emails - Ian Rickson, Director and Ben Power, Playwright and Deputy Artistic Director, Royal National Theatre.
- 5.8 CoverageBook Report on Media Coverage of Bowen's discovery of Dickens' attempt to place his wife in an asylum; YouTube [Brightside video](#) *Why Dickens' wife left her 10 children and the writer*.
- 5.9 Article in *The Guardian* quoting lead actress in, and writer of, *A Christmas Carol* staged at Wilton's Music Hall London, 23 Nov 2019.
- 5.10 (a) [Website](#) for V&A Deciphering Dickens project; (b) Testimonial - Douglas Dodds, Senior Curator, V&A; (c) V&A Annual Report 2018-19, p.7.