



Pete Orford, **The Mystery of Edwin Drood.**  
*Charles Dickens' Unfinished Novel and*  
*Our Endless Attempts to End It.*

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Reviewed by **Kathleen Beal**

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When Charles Dickens died on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1870, he left behind one of the most enduring enigmas of Victorian literature. His sudden death meant that he could not complete his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, something which inadvertently started a one-hundred-and-fifty-year contest to finish the work and present readers with a resolution as to the fate of the eponymous protagonist. Pete Orford sets out to untangle the many theories that have been put forward over the years and to debunk the most outrageous, questioning the arguments and counterarguments of the many who were convinced they know how Dickens intended the novel to end, or could write a better ending than Dickens would have produced. Orford identifies four distinct groups of “Droodists”, a term applied to those seeking to resolve the mystery of the eponymous character: the Opportunists; the Detectives; the Academics; and the Irreverent. In the provision of these clear subdivisions, Orford allows for the swift identification of the various theories surrounding proposed resolutions of the novel, which he then deconstructs with a consummate mix of academic rigour and humour. In his introduction, Orford states that some of the ideas under discussion are “utterly bizarre”, but recognises that “most, if not all, have been created out of an earnest desire to honour Dickens or share the author’s enthusiasm with a wider community” (xi). The book also contains black and white illustrations: a pictorial “Summary of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*” is followed by photographs which confirm the continuing interest in the search for a solution to the novel and include an image of the original monthly issue cover as well as posters for recent dramatic film and stage productions. There is also a very comprehensive bibliography, and a copious Notes section.

In Chapter One, “Nostalgia and Opportunism: The early solutions 1878-1885”, Orford comments on *The Cloven Foot* (1870) a parodic re-writing of *Drood* by Orpheus C. Kerr. As Orford comments, “what had started as a parody rhapsodising Dickens’ text was transformed [...] into a substitution for the original” (17). Henry Morford’s *John Jasper’s Secret* (1871) is also examined along with John Foster’s 1874 biography of Dickens. Scrutinising Foster’s claim to know how Dickens plotted the ending of *Drood*, Orford describes Foster’s account as “a disappointment” which “did nothing to stem the tide of *Drood* theorists” (24). Other early Opportunists’ theories about the novel’s conclusion are described by Orford as “indicative of the response to Dicken’s [...] not yet at the heights of literary reputation he would achieve in his afterlife” (30).

In the second chapter, “Clues and Conspiracies: The Drood Detectives 1878-1939”, the ideas of those seeking to ‘prove’ the ending are considered. According to Orford, the Detectives seek to show that Dickens’ skills as a writer “meant his work must have an ending that would elude the casual reader and not be so patently obvious” (35). This chapter offers a fascinating insight into the establishment of the Dickens Fellowship and the gradual acceptance of Dickens as a novelist worthy of academic scrutiny. The chapter also deals with early stage and cinema adaptations of *Edwin Drood*. The 1914 Dickens Fellowship ‘trial’ of John Jasper is examined, along with the general critical responses to the dramatic interpretations of the novel’s supposed ending. The chapter carefully considers the several ‘conclusions’ to the novel by those writers who claimed to know Dickens’s intentions as to the fate of Edwin Drood, with Orford suggesting that “while the conclusions can be disagreed with, their devotion to Dickens [...] should be respected” (75).

In Chapter 3, “Academics vs Enthusiasts: Taking Drood Seriously 1939-1985”, the gradual but sustained growth of the academic appreciation of Dickens is explored. The revival of scholarly interest is examined as the source of several innovative approaches to Edwin’s presumed fate. The contribution of Edmund Wilson in generating critical work on Dickens forms the basis for a major section of this chapter, with Orford commenting that “Wilson lifts *Drood* up, away from the popular and into the literary” (85). Wilson, argues Orford, encouraged a “new wave of scholars who sought to stop worrying about the half that was not written, and start focusing on the half that was” (88). Orford goes on to suggest that by the mid twentieth century “scholars moved on to consider weightier themes in the novel” (115).

In the final chapter, “Music and Comedy: A Return to Irreverence: 1985-2018”, Orford concentrates on the novel’s representation of the relationship between Jasper and Edwin in light of twenty-first century views of the purported homosexual relationship of the two men. This chapter goes on to consider the 2012 BBC television adaptation of the novel in the wake of renewed public interest in Dickens around the bicentenary of his birth. The television version of the novel adds to numerous earlier assumptions about extrapolations of Dickens’s intended outcome. Orford comments that “solutions and completions to *Drood* are subjective and always will be, no matter how vehemently the writer refers to evidence and sources. Interpretation is in the eye of the beholder” (167), and asks “how do you conclude a book that is all about a book with no conclusion?” (161). Of course, Orford does not attempt to offer a conclusion, but instead provides an eminently readable resume of the many endings to the novel proposed by others, suggesting that “the book’s merits were no longer to be found in its own pages but in the far greater volume of pages written by others trying to solve it” (45).

Overall, this is a riveting book for scholars of Dickens, Droodists, mystery aficionados and general readers. The book is a great addition to our understanding and appreciation of Dickens and the continuing relevance of his contribution to the literary canon. Orford's comprehensive research into the afterlife of *Edwin Drood* has resulted in an excellent reference which offers an evaluation of both Dickens's final novel and the many attempts made to solve the mystery and offer answers about the fate of Edwin Drood. Chapter 3, which comments on the way criticism and revisions have moved the novel from the "popular into the literary" (85), will be of particular interest to members of the Victorian Popular Fiction Association. In the conclusion, Orford succinctly sums up the novel with the view that, had Dickens completed the novel, "we would have a work that would comfortably sit in the top half of his works" (166). While such a statement could be taken as a simple scholarly conjecture, Orford's book definitely proves that all the integrations, re-writings and critical studies of *Edwin Drood* have increased its impact as a novel, blurring the lines between dramatic and satirical genres, past and present times and high-brow and low-brow literature. Please, read this book and decide for yourself if Orford is correct in his appraisal.