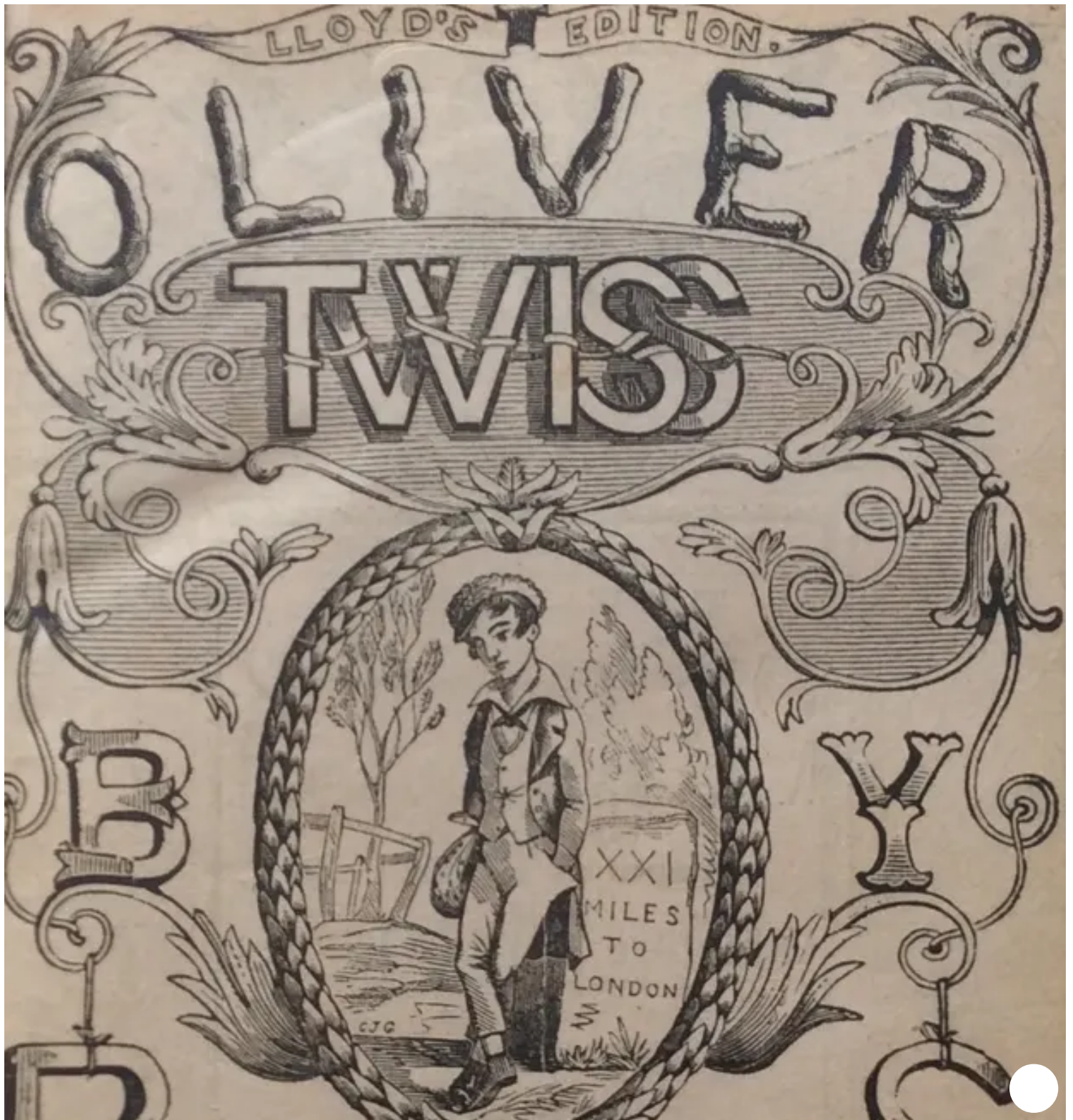


The Guardian



Oliver Twiss and Martin Guzzlewit - the fan fiction that ripped off Dickens

Press baron Edward Lloyd caused outrage with his cheap imitations of Dickens' great novels - and paved the way for his own hugely popular 'penny dreadfuls'

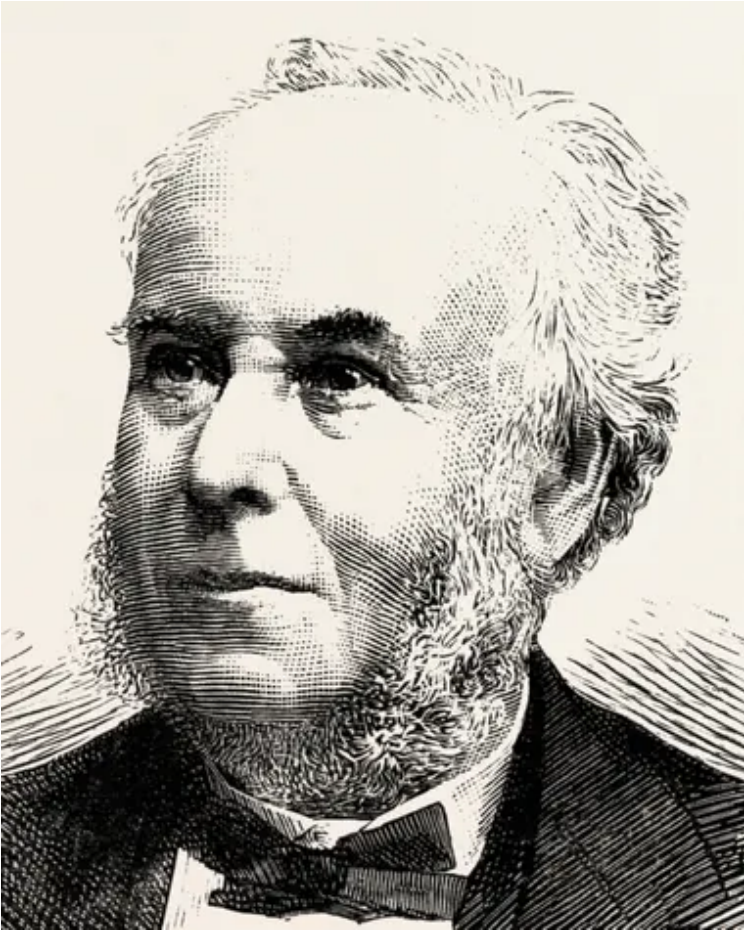
Alison Flood

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They are both orphans who leave the poorhouse to fall in with a criminal gang, but while Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* has stood the test of time, *Oliver Twiss*, a cheap copy that was rushed out to cash in on Dickens' popularity and which the novelist despised, has largely been forgotten.

Oliver Twiss was one of many plagiarisms of Dickens published by the press baron Edward Lloyd, with *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Guzzlewit*, *The Penny Pickwick* and *Nickelas Nickelbery* also hitting shelves in the mid-19th century. Dickens loathed the rip-offs, and went to court to have them banned. The judge refused, ruling: "No person who had ever seen the original could imagine the other to be anything else than a counterfeit, bearing no resemblance to the thing it was intended to imitate."

"Because of his background of poverty, Dickens was always obsessed with money and realised he was being ripped off left, right and centre," says Professor Rohan McWilliam of Anglia Ruskin University, co-editor of a new collection of essays about Lloyd. "In a rather dubious judgment, the judge argued that nobody could possibly confuse the two publications because *The Penny Pickwick* was so inferior in its look. He chucked out the case, and Dickens could do nothing about it ... [He] was outraged that other authors and publishers were making money from his creations."



'There must be blood!'... Edward Lloyd. Photograph: Universal Images Group/Getty Images

The imitations were much cheaper than the originals - The Penny Pickwick cost a penny, compared with a shilling for Dickens' story. "It's very likely that, given these things saturated the market for a while, from about 1837 to 1845, many working-class readers first encountered Dickens not through his original works but in these weird doppelgangers that were going around," says McWilliam. "There were many titles produced, which indicates they were incredibly popular. In some ways the plagiarisms could be seen as the original fan fiction, as they took familiar characters and did different things with them."

Edward Lloyd and *His World*, edited by McWilliam and Sarah Louise Lill and published by Routledge, reveals that Oliver Twiss, unlike Dickens' creation, leaves the poorhouse after being punished for fighting bullies attacking a young girl. Nancy is now known as Poll Smiggins and is given a more sexually explicit backstory. Bill Sikes is now Jem Blount, who also murders his lover but is not haunted by her death and continues his criminal career until he is killed accidentally. Oliver goes on to earn a BA at Oxford.

In an essay included in the collection, Adam Abraham writes: "Oliver Twist remains very much a middle-class text: Dickens' Oliver is saved from the potential corruption of London's criminal underworld through the machinations of Brownlow's bourgeois benevolence and the revelation of the orphan's true parentage. Oliver Twiss, in contrast, offers more extensive scenes of the lives of servants and the pleasures of the masses, such as a cheap theatre [...] and a 'hop' or ball that some of the characters attend."

After publishing *The Penny Pickwick*, Lloyd went on to build a publishing empire. He told the illustrators of his “penny dreadfuls” – grisly horror novels that included the first appearance of the demon barber of Fleet Street, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Varney the Vampire* – “There must be blood ... much more blood!”

“When we think of the 1840s, we think of the publication of major novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair*,” says McWilliam. “The reality is that many readers were as likely to be consuming shockers issued by Lloyd, such as *Ada the Betrayed*.”

By the early 1850s, Lloyd had moved away from fiction. His Sunday publication, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, which drew readers with lurid true-crime stories, had become increasingly lucrative and would become the first paper to sell a million copies.

“He thought, rightly, that newspapers were where the serious money was to be made. Sales through the 50s, 60s and 70s of *Lloyds’ Newspaper* really go through the roof – it’s ubiquitous in lots of working-class homes,” says McWilliam. “He almost creates the languages of the popular press in terms of sensationalism. He knows the kind of stuff that’s going to sell. So he has serious political reporting but will also tell you about train crashes, terrible murders, infanticide in the Forest of Dean.”

McWilliam believes Lloyd to be a key figure who shaped popular culture, in terms of the press and popular fiction. “But,” he says, “no one’s ever really taken him very seriously before.

“Lloyd should be much better known as he was a key figure in the emergence of newspapers and popular culture in Britain, but his reputation failed to live on following his death in 1890. Although his publications have little literary merit, hopefully our book shows that Lloyd’s overall achievements deserve much greater recognition.”

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