

The Rambles of a Curran Fellow in Oxford

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My interest in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Libraries centers on an index of uncatalogued remnants of nineteenth-century novels in parts. These were titles issued in installments, usually appearing monthly for the price of a shilling each, in colored paper wrappers with one or two illustrated plates per number. Many no longer exist in their serial form, which was historically considered ephemeral and, bibliographically, inferior to first editions, and some I had traced to the Johnson Collection only. My project, a bibliography of Victorian fiction originally printed in this format, narrows my focus to titles published after 1836, but it was a pre-Victorian item that impressed me most on this visit.

Misattributed to Pierce Egan and misdated to 1821, as I later learned, was the first and only part of “Life in Paris; Illustrated with Scenes from Real Life, drawn and engraved by Mr. George Cruikshank” and published by John Cumberland. Usually, exceptions to the shilling number norm are noticeably different – more or less expensive, physically bigger or longer, shorter or smaller – even as they always give me pause over the parameters of my project. This time, I lingered particularly long over the convention of dating part publication, where new fiction was concerned, to the serialization of Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers* in 1836–37. Of course, this installment of *Life in Paris* featured only one plate and ran to 24 pages for a shilling – but then, my record of titles departing from the 32-page, two-plate Dickensian paradigm had the makings of a bibliography unto itself. And here was a work of original fiction that looked suggestively like the part issues inaugurated, in their Victorian form, some ten years later.

It was only on peering inside the foxed and flaking wrappers that I perceived a different set of distinctions between the Victorian novels so familiar to me and their near precursors.

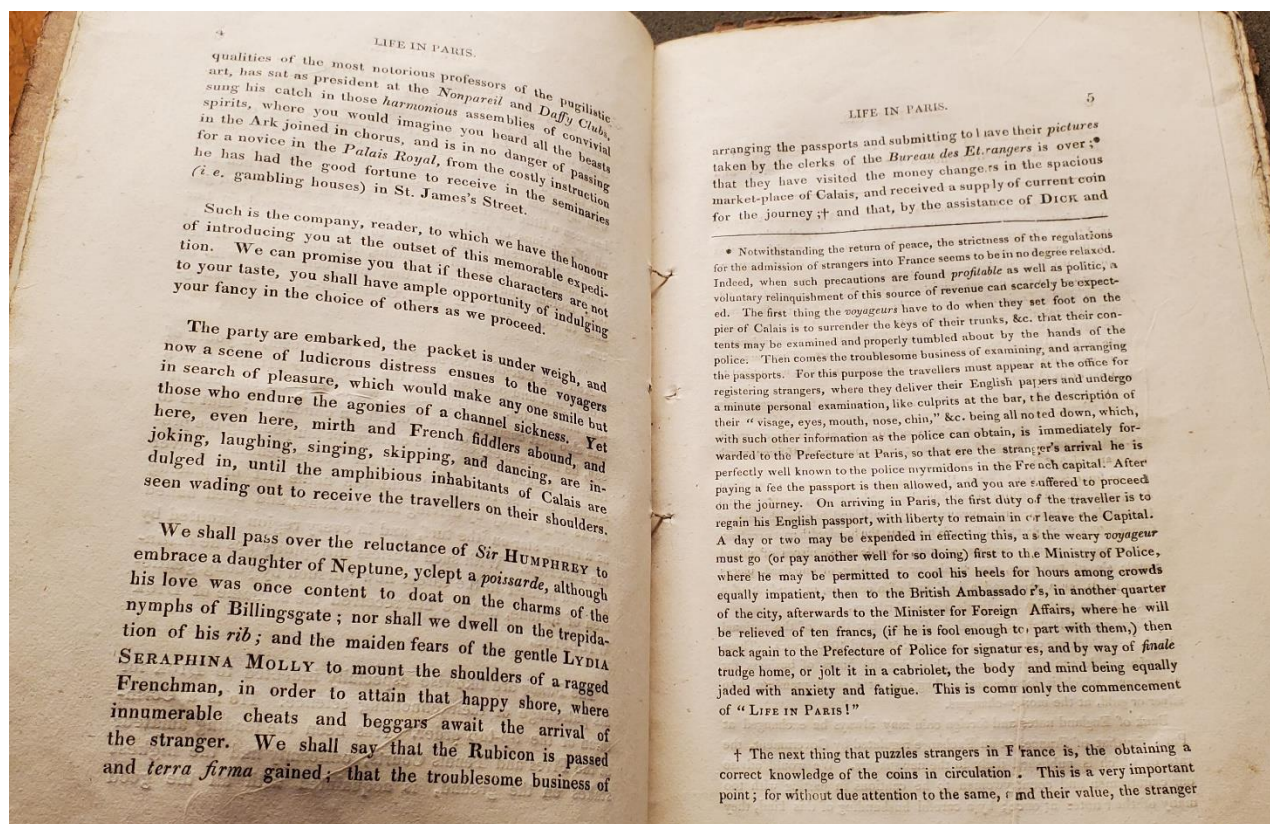


Fig. 1. Pages from the first installment of "Life in Paris," in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford¹

Notice the typographical emphasis, in the pages pictured here, on proper nouns, such as **LYDIA SERAPHINA MOLLY** and, that virtuosic combination of irregular fonts, *Sir HUMPHREY*. Even the eponymous **DICK** (of the unabbreviated title) would not go disregarded by the time-thrifty compositor. Note, too, the breezy spacing of the paragraphs, as well as the exuberance of the footnotes occupying the better half of the right – and the following! – page. It is by no means the case that such typographical embellishments and narrative techniques went missing in the Victorian era. But it must be admitted that there was more space, as it were, both figuratively and physically, for this sort of textual dexterity in eighteenth-century novels, before the explosion of popular readership in the mid-1800s took place, bringing into fashion a new set of visual and literary conventions.

One of these, a trend towards paratextual brevity and uniformity of type, can even be observed from the title page of "Life in Paris" as it evolved over the 1820s. I learned after my Bodleian visit, on researching this title, that it was reissued by John Cumberland in 1828 from an edition, by John Fairburn, that finished serialization in 1822. The earlier version, I found, is more readily available, in volumes as (albeit less so) in parts, whereas the Johnson copy of the Cumberland serial at its inception appears to be the only relic of the later serialization. On the original title page, the novel is called "Life in Paris; Comprising the Rambles, Sprees, and Amours, of Dick Wildfire, of Corinthian Celebrity, And his Bang-up Companions, Squire Jenkins and Captain O'Shuffleton; with the whimsical adventures of the Halibut family; including sketches of a

¹ I am deeply grateful to the Librarian of the John Johnson Collection, Julie Anne Lambert, for her responsive and encouraging assistance before and after my visit, and at all times in between.

variety of other eccentric characters in the French metropolis.” This is compressed to “Life in Paris: Or the Rambles, Sprees, and Amours, of Dick Wildfire, Squire Jenkins and Captain O’Shuffleton; With the Whimsical Adventures of the Halibut Family; and Other Eccentric Characters in the French Metropolis” in the Cumberland issue, which makes additional redactions to the Fairburn title page, as seen below.

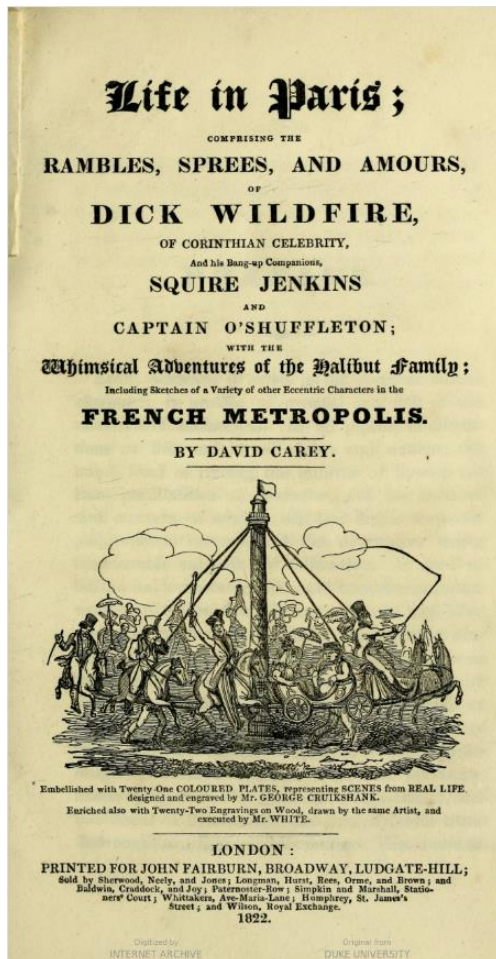


Fig. 2. Title page of the first, volume edition of “Life in Paris,” Hathitrust²

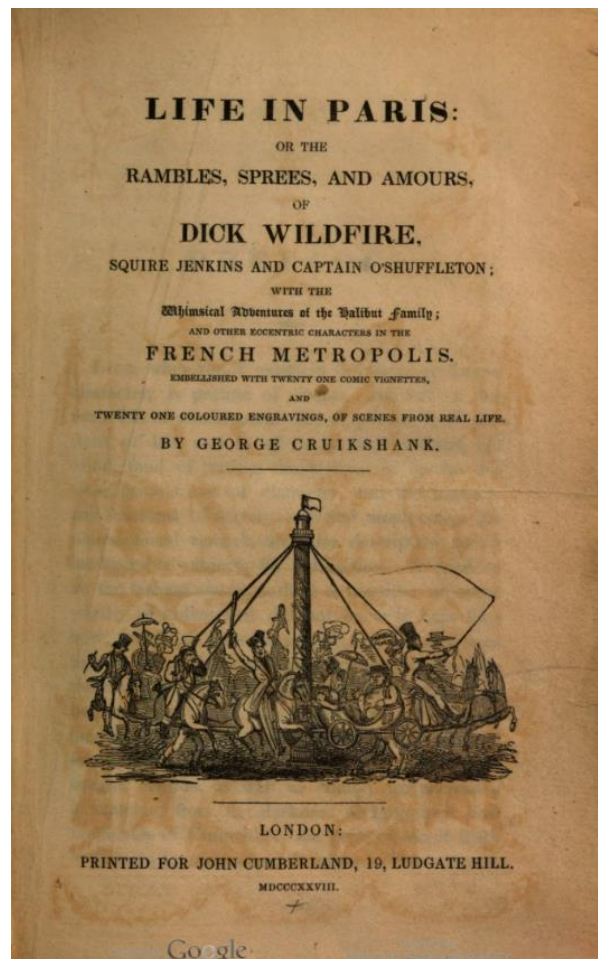


Fig. 3. Title page of the 1828 edition of “Life in Paris,” Hathitrust³

What Victorian publisher would print an “explanation of the plate” and the wood-cut accompanying each number of a comic novel on its inside front wrapper? To the average, market-savvy pressman, this space would be wasted without some form of advertisement, whether of in-house or other trade goods; occasionally, inside wrappers would indeed appear blank, but this was indeed occasionally. What Victorian writer, for that matter, would italicize the words “life,” “desirable,” “to boot,” and “tailor” on the same printed page of expository text?

² Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark:/13960/t1mg8vx6v&view=2up&seq=11>.

³ Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=osu.32435079866844&view=2up&seq=14>.

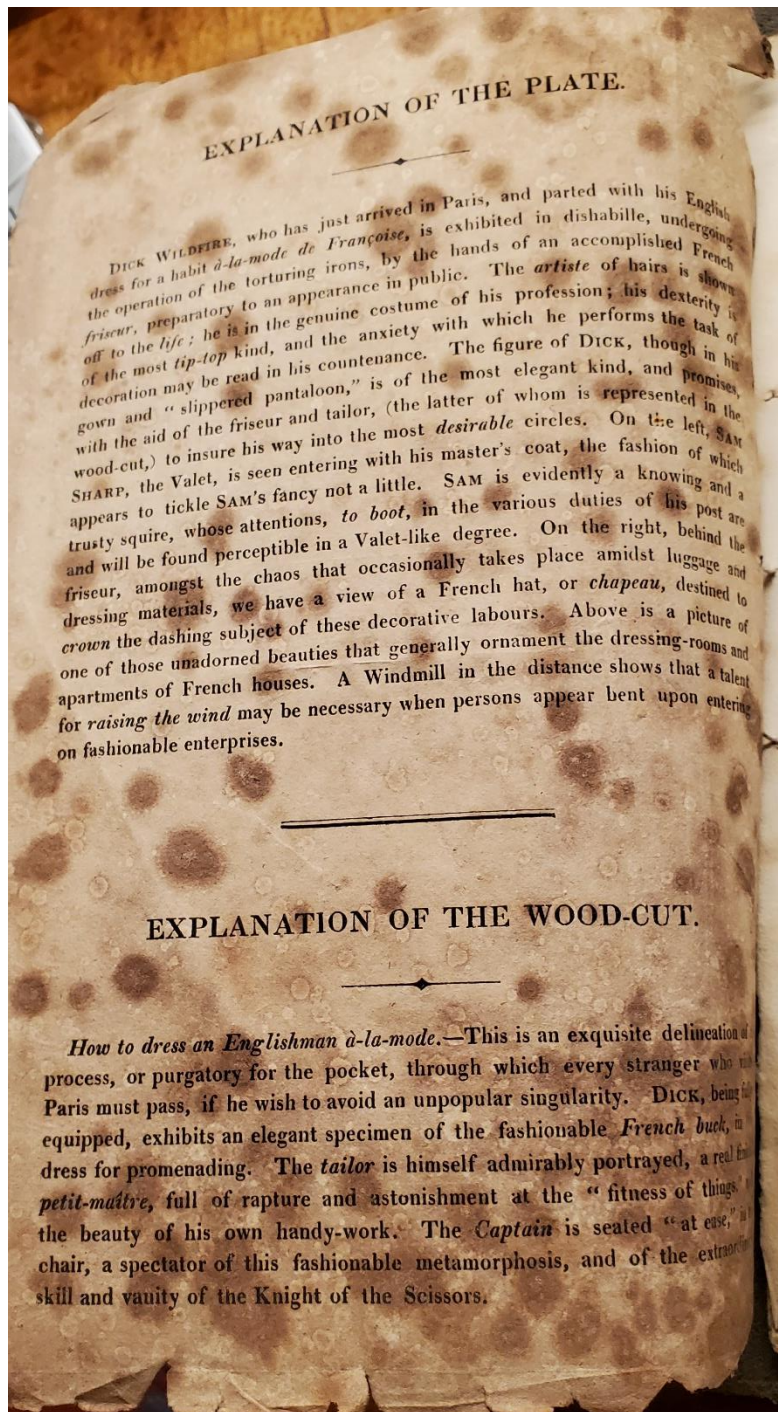


Fig. 4. Inside front wrapper of the first installment of "Life in Paris," in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford

Any bibliographer or print historian will attest to the value of a composite picture: this is the premise behind comparing duplicates and distinguishing issues, from editions, from states. It is a version of the case for understanding something by considering it in the context of what it is like and what it is not. The same logic applies to period scholarship, of literary as of book history. My research on installment fiction at the Bodleian turned up a token of the transformation in print that

precipitated the Victorian shilling monthly novel. It was a matter of looking between the covers, as both a (somewhat) bibliographer and a (somewhat more seasoned) reader, to appreciate this unexpected highlight of my trip.

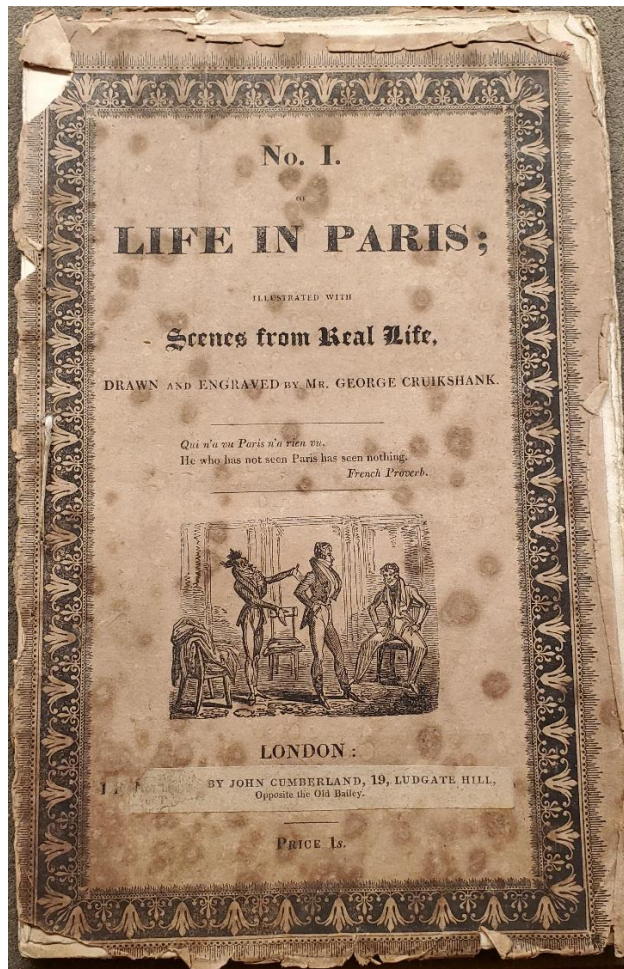


Fig. 5. Front wrapper of the first installment of "Life in Paris," in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford

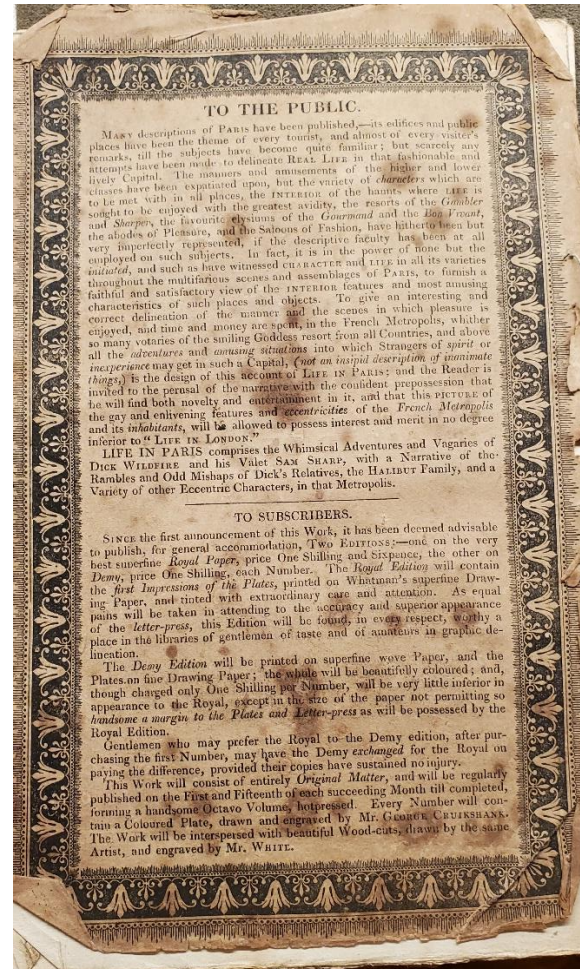


Fig. 6. Back wrapper of the first installment of "Life in Paris," in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford