NONFICTION: "The Great Charles Dickens Scandal," by Michael Slater

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Not long after the death of Charles Dickens, George Augustus Sala, a reporter for the London Daily Telegraph and the author of a biography of the great writer, insisted that nothing more need be said about the "scandalous imputations" surrounding the failure of Dickens' marriage. But Sala couldn't resist feeding the rumor mill. Although "the world has no right to inquire into the mystery -- if any mystery there be -- nor will have, any time these fifty years," he suggested that "those who have a right to speak have not spoken."

Almost a century and a half later, Dickensians remain interested. In "The Great Charles Dickens Scandal," Michael Slater, an emeritus professor of Victorian Literature at the University of London and former president of the International Dickens Fellowship, gives them what they're looking for: a painstakingly precise examination of the allegations that Dickens had an affair, a love nest and a child with actress Ellen "Nelly" Ternan; the cover-up by the family; and the search for the truth by legions of literary detectives.

Slater demonstrates that the assiduous sleuths made a lot, and at times too much, of the bits and pieces of evidence available to them. Sir Felix Aylmer, a leading member of the theatrical profession, for example, concluded that the note in Dickens' diary for April 13, 1867 -- "at Sl[ough]; at 2 1/2. Arrival" -- referred to the birth of a baby in the town where Dickens and Ternan apparently shared an apartment. Dickens' business agent, W.H. Wills, visited six days later (the only visitor to Slough recorded in the diaries), Aylmer speculated, to stand as godfather to the child in a private christening ceremony. Further investigation by Graham Story, an editor of Dickens' letters, indicates that Aylmer was wrong on all counts.

Although Slater draws no definitive conclusions about the scandal, he observes that the number of people who believe that Dickens' relationship with Nelly was platonic "is not large." And he deems "plausible" scenarios in which a three-month stay in a Paris hotel in 1862 culminated in the birth of a child, whose death sometime later was preceded by "a rush across the Channel" to visit "a sick friend."

More important, Slater claims that the "frisson and fascination" with the scandal will go on indefinitely because Dickens represents an "ideal of perfect, blissful, quintessentially English domesticity."

He may be right. But, then again, it seems more likely to me that...
the interest of the media and the masses is due to an obsession with secrets, and sex, and with stories about celebrities who seem to have it all, but whose personal lives turn out to be no more satisfying than ours.

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THE GREAT CHARLES DICKENS SCANDAL

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Review: Slater draws no definitive conclusions but notes that the fascination with this scandal will go on indefinitely because of the enduring interest in Charles Dickens.