First steps toward a history of the Mid-Victorian novel in colonial Australia

I am interested in a model of literary interpretation responsive to the spatial and temporal distances across which texts move. My approach is to use quantitative reading data to analyse the circulation of Victorian written culture in a range of Australian colonial contexts, and to construct from that analysis locally situated re-readings of well-known and lesser-known novels.

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The Victorian Era is seen as the link between Romanticism of the 18th century and the realism of the 20th century. The novel as a genre rose to entertain the rising middle class and to depict the contemporary life in a changing society. In the same year that Queen Victoria ascended the throne, Charles Dickens published the first parts of his novel Oliver Twist, a story of an orphan and his struggle with poverty in the early part of the century. As the Industrial Revolution surged on, the class difference between the traditional aristocracy and the middle class was gradually getting reduced and with the passing of the Reform Act, the middle class got the right to vote and be politically engaged in the affairs of the nation. The Victorian period in British history marks the high point of British imperialism. Though the British policy of colonial expansion had begun earlier, during the nineteenth century Britain not only consolidated its existing empire, but also experienced an unprecedented expansion in its colonial possessions. This process began after the 1857 Mutiny in India, when India was placed under the direct control of the Crown, and continued through the scramble for Africa in the late 1800s, so that by the end of the century it could be proudly proclaimed that “the sun never sets on the British Empire...” The linking of colonialism with the genre of the romantic adventure story is also evident in the abundant children’s fiction of the time, which includes works by Robert Louis Stevenson and R. M. Ballantyne.