



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2020

Diligence to Boulogne

An extraordinary ink drawing has come to light showing Wilkie Collins and his friend the artist Edward Matthew Ward in the diligence (a type of carriage) from Paris to Boulogne. The hitherto unknown drawing surfaced at an auction in February in what appears to be a Collins family album of drawings and watercolours. Some are undoubtedly by William Collins, one is by Charles and others are by various hands.



(Photo courtesy Jonathan Peachy)

Wilkie is depicted with three other passengers in the top seats (second from the left) apparently holding a whip. Ward is the middle one of three passengers in the lower section. The drawing undoubtedly dates from the 1840s. The clues are Wilkie's appearance and designation as W. W. Collins, plus the fact they took a coach not a train – no railway reached Boulogne until 1848 and the line to Paris came sometime after that. The 162 mile journey would take nearly 24 hours including meal stops. In the 1840s Wilkie visited Paris several times – as shown by his letters – but usually with Edward Ward's older brother Charles. This is the first evidence of a trip with Edward Ward. Wilkie wrote to his mother on 6 October 1845 from Hotel de Tuileries, Rue de Rivoli, Paris

I have just received – my excellent parent – your delightful communication of the 2nd inst. Many thanks for your expressions of affection and your announcement of the departure of the cheque...I have definitely fixed to depart by the 2 o'clock (P.M.) Diligence for Boulogne, on the 13th – and hope to be in Devonport Street on the evening of the 14th. My official labours will, therefore, commence on the morning of the 15th. By this plan, I attain the utmost extension possible of my stay in Paris – a very pleasant and necessary achievement, considering that the Italian Opera has begun and that "Pâtés de Foies Gras" are daily expected at the principal Restaurants.

Wilkie's previous letter had asked Harriet for money. On 3 September he had been given £35 which had run out. A cheque to him for £10 was drawn on 4 October. He was delaying as long as possible his return to work at Antrobus, the tea merchant. However, at this time he was alone in Paris. The letter continues

You need cherish no feelings of commiseration for my solitary state. The privilege of being able to consult my own tastes and inclinations without the slightest reference to anyone else, quite counterbalances the inconvenience of my being – like a late royal Solomon – "all alone by myself".

In a postscript dated the next day he adds "The £10 - - has arrived, and I am grateful."

Although it is certain the drawing dates from this decade the exact trip has not been identified. In 1847 he visited Normandy and later Paris with Charles Ward and wrote an account of the trip for *Bentley's Miscellany* ('A Pictorial Tour to St. George Bosherville' May 1851, vol. IX, pp. 493-508). He mentions the 'diligence' several times in that narrative. The periodical can be read online at

babel.haithitrust.org. The WCS published a reprint of the story in 1996 which can be ordered from the society website, price £2.50.

The collection of 33 pictures and drawings can still be seen at the auction house website www.reemandansie.com search 'William Collins'. It was lot 975 on 12 February 2020.

AN ITALIAN OBITUARY

In the series 'Gallery of Contemporaries', an obituary of Collins has been found in the Milan newspaper *L'illustrazione Popolare* for 6 October 1889, appearing shortly after Collins's death. (Vol. XXVI, No. 40, Milan, pp. 625-626). The following is a very free translation:

Wilkie Collins is one of the most popular English writers in Italy. Who does not remember the solution to the mystery of his novel *The Woman in White*? In London it created a mania, where the people were speculating on the solution to the plot.

The rich and famous Wilkie Collins died on the 24 September aged 65. He was born in London in 1824, son of the painter William [Collins] who sold his pictures for their weight in gold to the most illustrious Englishmen. Together with his father, the young Wilkie made a tour of Italy after which at the age of 26 he wrote his first novel, *Antonina*, devoted to an episode in the capture of Rome by Alaric.

This, however, was not his first book. Two years before he had written a biography of his father who died in 1847. His principle novels are *The Woman in White*, *The Law and the Lady*, *The Frozen Deep*, *Poor Miss Finch*, *Man and Wife*, 'The Yellow Mask', *The New Magdalen*, *The Black Robe*, *I say No*, *The Dead Secret*, *The Evil Genius*, etc. Following their translation into Italian, these continue to be avidly read; they are published by Fratelli Treves which is currently publishing *The Legacy of Cain* by Collins. Wilkie Collins also tried the theatre where he achieved moderate success with his drama *Black and White*.

He did not have the imagination of Walter Scott or the meticulousness of Dickens which brought to life both the passions of his characters and even inanimate objects; but Collins appreciated that the spontaneity of style and the weaving of the plot would entertain and move his readers.

We would like to offer our readers a small but little-known masterpiece by the famous novelist which will begin in our next issue and take up just five or six numbers. Our readers can judge for themselves how such a moving drama might be accomplished in just a few pages.

The masterpiece was in fact the novella ‘Gabriel’s Marriage’ (originally published in *Household Words* for 16-23 April 1853, and reissued in *After Dark* (1856). The story was published as ‘Le Nozze di Gabriele’ in *L’illustrazione Popolare* in six weekly parts from 13 October to 17 November 1889.

WALTER BESANT

Published in the Liverpool English Text and Studies is *Walter Besant: The Business of Literature and the Pleasures of Reform* by Kevin A. Morrison, professor in the School of Foreign Languages at Henan University, China. (978-1-789-62035-1, £80). Quoting from the Liverpool University Press blurb:

In the 1880s and 1890s, Walter Besant was one of Britain’s most lionized living novelists. Like many popular writers of the period, Besant suffered from years of critical neglect. Yet his centrality to Victorian society and culture all but ensured a revival of interest. While literary critics are now rediscovering the more than forty works of fiction that he penned or co-wrote, as part of a more general reevaluation of Victorian popular literature, legal scholars have argued that Besant, by advocating for copyright reform, played a crucial role in consolidating a notion of literary property as the exclusive possession of the individuated intellect.

Walter Besant was also a social reformer and founder of the Society of Authors in 1884. Collins was also an enthusiastic founder-member and honorary vice-president.

In 1889 Besant wrote the conclusion to *Blind Love*. Collins realised that August that he was too ill to finish *Blind Love*, then being serialised in the *Illustrated London News*. Collins suggested A. P. Watt should approach Besant, a long-standing friend and popular novelist: “if he has the time I think he will do it...he knows that I would do the same for him if he were in my place.” Besant agreed to complete the novel and received Collins's working notes. He was surprised to find they represented a detailed scenario with fragments of dialogue already inserted. Besant was “careful to adhere faithfully and exactly to the plot, scene by scene, down to the smallest detail as it was laid down by the author.” He later persuaded Andrew Chatto, to allow him “to write a preface stating my share in the book...to give the real facts of the case.”

COLLINS IN THE TIME OF THE COVID

Wilkie was no stranger to illness but fortunately never came in contact with anything like the present pandemic and by and large avoided contagious diseases such as cholera and typhoid. Nevertheless, he was frequently forced to remain at home – ‘self-isolating’ in modern parlance - when badly affected by what he usually described as ‘rheumatic gout’.

Wilkie would in fact have come into contact with cholera when touring Italy with William, Harriet and Charles between 1836 and 1838. The family was forced to leave Naples in a hurry because of a cholera epidemic during 1836.

Parts of *Antonina: or the Siege of Rome* are based on Wilkie’s four months in the city and one of the themes, apart from starvation, is the plague. He describes “the plague-tainted atmosphere” and the wind “plague-laden from the east” and “caught the infection of the recklessness and despair which had seized his fellow-sufferers from one end of Rome to the other.” They weren’t in quarantine (a word derived from Italian for 40 days isolation) but “Time flowed on - the monotonous hours of the day waned again toward night; and plague and famine told their lapse in the fated highways of Rome.”

Via his friends, Collins would have been aware of other highly contagious fevers. His solicitor, Edward Benham, died of smallpox and fever in 1867 and Holman Hunt came back from abroad with typhoid in 1882. Typhus makes an appearance in *The Woman in White* when Marian Halcombe, caught outside in the rain, survives the fever after eavesdropping on Fosco and Glyde.

WILKIE IN DICKENS’S PERIODICALS

The excellent online editions of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* have solved a problem that had previously stopped their search function from working. I am delighted to say it is now back in order at www.djo.org.uk. So you can now search by author or for words in the text and find Wilkie’s contributions to the two periodicals. If there are items you have not read this is an excellent place to start. Try the first female detective story – the ‘Diary of Anne Rodway’. Or read *The Dead Secret* as originally published in 24 parts. Or the ‘Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’ by both Collins and Dickens. Or

just read his early contributions to *Household Words* in chronological order. As well as these, you can also search for his brother Charles's contributions. This free online resource is provided thanks to the work of Professor John Drew at the University of Buckingham.

RICHARD JEFFERIES

The Victorian author Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) was a fan of Wilkie Collins. In a short book *Reporting; Editing & Authorship. Practical Hints for Beginners in Literature* that he published himself in 1873 he wrote

after Wilkie Collins' "Woman in White", there came out a host of women in various colours. And all of these seemed to be read. The great authors had created a taste which the lesser rushed to gratify to the utmost. Noted authors' works should be studied for their several excellences. Ouida for the exquisite painting of scenery and delineation of beauty in every form: Wilkie Collins for the method of writing, of telling a story: and for the effect, special knowledge of a special subject will produce even in novel writing: Miss Braddon to catch the indescribable tone of the hour, the taste of the public.

But later he was warned off imitating Collins by the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Frederick Greenwood. In a letter dated 10 March - probably written in 1877 - Greenwood wrote about an unidentified piece Jefferies had sent him

On reading this, I feel obliged, as your anxious but possibly enough mistaken friend, to warn against the style you have adopted in these papers. I will take the liberty of saying that this so well-marked style, an entirely new fangled one, was never before adopted (till you took it up) by any single writer who was not more or less of a literary imposter. It originated, I believe, in *Household Words*, or in *All the Year Round*. It has been used by nobody so much as by Mr Wilkie Collins in Mr Wilkie Collins' worst days, and he always was a bad writer—a thoroughly and contemptibly bad writer, according to my standard at any rate, and now, just when the style has sickened even those who once found some sort of fascination in it, you abandon the straightforward, simple, and in all respects most appropriate English of your Gamekeeper to take up with this tricky flashy manner. You see by the bad language I myself am using that I detest this style, which has no ancestry, and not a single respectable connection. Do please go back to your original manner.

We are grateful to Jean Saunders, Hon. Secretary of the Richard Jefferies Society, for this information.

WILKIE'S RELATIONSHIPS

There is nothing new in this account of Wilkie and his two lifelong loves – Caroline Graves and Martha Rudd – but Emily Hines takes an interesting approach to Wilkie's relationships <https://bit.ly/3IHWLMC>. It was originally published for the 150th anniversary of Caroline's short-lived marriage to Richard Clow on 29 October 1868. Hines lives in Memphis Tennessee and is a freelance editor and writer.

THE COP STORY

This interesting mention of Wilkie Collins is from the US website vulture.com - see bit.ly/3bD28bj

Cops have been main characters in fiction for more than a century. Dickens's Inspector Bucket, the only figure with the cultural mobility to tie together all the plots in *Bleak House*, led to Wilkie Collins's Sergeant Cuff, who led to Dick Tracy, Perry Mason, and the boom in police procedural novels and radio shows in the 1930s and '40s. The police story as a narrative status quo didn't start on TV, but TV has perfected it, metastasized it, and franchised it into ubiquity.

Sergeant Cuff was of course the rose-growing detective in *The Moonstone*. His character was based on the real-life Inspector Whicher who solved the Road murder case, identifying Constance Kent who was acquitted but many years later confessed; his appearance relied on another Scotland Yard detective, Inspector Walker.

THE DUCHESS AND WILKIE – A ROYAL ACCOLADE

You may know her as Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall but in Scotland she is known as the Duchess of Rothesay from the title Prince Charles adopts when he is in that country. It was in her Scottish guise that she told the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* that among her top five novels for holiday reading was *The Woman in White*.

'The Duchess of Rothesay has exclusively invited *Press and Journal* readers to enjoy a "welcome bit of escapism" with a new reading list featuring some of her favourite books' wrote Kieran Beattie in the issue of 21 August. 'Her first recommendation is *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins. Penned in 1859, it is considered among bibliophiles to be one of the first mystery novels ever written, and is celebrated as an early example of detective

fiction. Camilla described it as “a menacing and mysterious tale spun by this great Victorian writer, with a penchant for drama”.

Among her other choices were Edna O’Brien’s *The Girl* and the 1849 novel by Alexandre Dumas *The Queen’s Necklace*. See pressandjournal.co.uk search ‘wilkie collins’.

SHADY PLACES AND HAMPSTEAD

Richard T. Kelly invoked *The Woman in White* for a piece about places that inspired the Gothic novel in *The Shady Places of North London (Ham and High, 23 June 2020)*.

In 1860, Wilkie Collins gave readers the unforgettable scene of his hero Walter Hartright picking across Hampstead Heath in darkness only to be startled by “the figure of a solitary woman, dressed from head to foot in white.” That moment on the page still startles today and, back then, it certainly inspired Bram Stoker, who went on to invent the “Hampstead Mystery” section of *Dracula* in which vampiress Lucy Westenra haunts the Heath and nips at the throats of little boys who tell the police childish tales of a “bloofer lady”. For me and millions of readers, these stories suggested that Hampstead and Highgate were natural sites for dark, dangerous, even diabolical doings. See hamhigh.co.uk search ‘wilkie collins’.

Also in *The Woman in White*, Anne Catherick claims that she was born in Hampstead. This part of London features significantly in several other works by Collins. In *Armadale*, the Vale of Health is the probable location for Dr Downward’s sanatorium, where Lydia Gwilt attempts to murder Allan Armadale. Fairweather Vale is ‘a new neighbourhood, situated below the high ground of Hampstead on the southern side’. Miss Gwilt lodges at ‘Fairweather Vale Villas’. Mr Bruff, the Lawyer in *The Moonstone*, lives in Hampstead. It is in his house ‘as the clock of Hampstead church struck three’ that Rachel Verinder tells Franklin Blake she saw him steal the diamond. In *Blind Love*, the villainous Dr Vimpany lives in a cottage near the Heath at 5 Redburn Place and Lord Harry is found with his throat cut in a lonely spot on Hampstead Heath.

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