



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2020

With most of the world under politically directed lockdown, there has been rather a dearth of Collins activity over the last few months. So now might be a good time to look at what he thought about epidemics, doctors and politicians. But first, a warning from Wilkie. Since very few of us are in a position to venture abroad, we can remind you of a cautionary note from *The Black Robe*:

'I hope you won't pay the rheumatic penalty of a winter residence in England'

EPIDEMICS

Collins was no stranger to epidemics and where necessary engaged in some nineteenth century 'social distancing'. Beginning when as a young boy he travelled with his family to Italy in 1837, he later recalled in a letter to R. H. Dana (17 June 1850).

The "Cholera" was then, beginning its ravages in Italy – Wordsworth was bound for Naples, like ourselves; but the reports that the pestilence had broken out in that city "gave him pause". I remember being quite astonished at the earnestness with which he entreated my father to do as he intended to do, and not only abandon all idea of going to Naples, but leave Rome at once for England. My father tried in vain to combat his apprehensions – the very idea of the Cholera seemed to fill him with horror – he left Italy, as he had determined to leave it, and we went on, as we had determined.

Later in the year, however, the Collins family was also obliged to leave Naples in a hurry because of the cholera and spent a month during October 1837 in Ischia. In a letter to his mother on the first of September 1856 Collins wrote from Boulogne:

There has been an epidemic – (malignant sore throat) among the children here ever since June which the townspeople kept secret, of course, as long as they could, for the sake of their own interests. Being far out of the town we only heard vaguely about the disease, until last Saturday week, when Dickens received a letter from Sir Joseph Oliffe – Physician to the Paris Embassy – entreating him to send all his children away from Boulogne. None of them were ill – our situation here being so healthy and so well away from the town – but Dickens, as a measure of precaution, instantly took Oliffe's advice – knowing the reliability of the man who offered it. All the boys were sent to London under their mother's care – those at school here as well as the youngest.

Later on, Collins would have known that on Tuesday 27 February 1872 a Thanksgiving Service was held at St Paul's Cathedral for the survival of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales. The thirty-year-old heir to the throne had almost died from typhoid fever the previous December. Victoria appeared in public for the first time since her husband Albert had died ten years before.

Becoming more topical, 'plague' was also a feature of Wilkie's vocabulary but used in connection with this time of year. In correspondence with Mary Frith on 27 December 1870 he noted

Many thanks for your kind note. Even at this festive season when the Plague of Plum pudding extends its ravages from end to end of the land, and lays the national digestion prostrate at the feet of Christmas.

Obviously, his views did not change since writing to his good friend Sebastian Schlesinger on 29 December 1883

Here is another year coming to an end, dear Sebastian – and here is your infirm old friend still keeping alive, in deference to the interests of his Insurers in the United States. There is every temptation to die. We have not seen the sun for three weeks, in London – the plague of Christmas Cards is on the increase.

POLITICIANS

And some cynical comments on our leaders:

Lord B. is the greatest impostor of modern times. In politics a glib tongue and no scruples will do wonders. But literature under false pretences, betrays the pretender. I sincerely believe that man to be the very worst novelist that has ever appeared in print. (Referring to Lord Beaconsfield (Disraeli) in a letter to George Maclean Rose, January 1881).

"Which of our political parties deserves the confidence of the English people?" In plain terms, on his sides Randal answered: "The party that lowers the taxes." Those words acted on the

discussion like water on a fire. As members of Parliament, the two contending politicians were naturally innocent of the slightest interest in the people or the taxes; they received the new idea submitted to them in helpless silence. From *The Evil Genius*.

DOCTORS AND MEDICINE

And some equally disparaging comments on the medical profession:

The doctors had no immediate fear of his death. He proved the doctors to be mistaken, and took the liberty of dying at a time when they all declared that there was every hope of his recovery. *Jezebel's Daughter*.

The doctor who is not honest enough to confess it when he is puzzled, is a well-known member of the medical profession in all countries. *Jezebel's Daughter*

He is at the head of his profession.....and he knows no more about it than I do. The great physician has just gone away with two guineas in his pocket. One guinea for advising me to keep her quiet; another guinea for telling me to trust to time..... *The New Magdalen*.

The medical profession thrives on two incurable diseases in these modern days - a He-disease and a She-disease. She disease - nervous depression; He-disease - suppressed gout. Remedies, one guinea if *you* go to the doctor; two guineas if the doctor goes to you. *The New Magdalen*

WILKIE AT DINNER

On Monday 25 January 1858 Wilkie Collins sat down to dinner in the *Household Words* offices with Dickens, his sub-editor W. H. Wills, and three other contributors to the weekly periodical. He had been on the staff there at £5-5s a week since October 1856. John Hollingshead, a new writer on *Household Words*, described the scene.

It was the day in January 1858, on which the Princess Royal was married. London was crowded with visitors and at night the whole town was illuminated. The party consisted of Wilkie Collins, Mark Lemon, Mr Wills, the honourable Mr Townshend, Charles Dickens and myself. The master, dressed in a velvet smoking coat as part of his dress suit, received me in a very friendly manner and made me a companion in five minutes. I noticed, as I thought then, a slight lisp, the deep lines on his face almost furrows and the keen twinkling glance of his eyes.

The room we dined in was on the upper floor...Our dinner was simple and good. We began with oysters brought in fresh from Old "Rule's" in Maiden Lane near to where Congreve lived when Voltaire visited him...The principle dish was a baked leg of mutton, the bone of which had been taken out, and the space supplied with oysters and veal stuffing. I always understood that this was an invention of Dickens, who, without being a gourmand, was fond of eating and drinking. As I was helped twice to this novel delicacy, I remembered some of the master's

descriptions of humble but savoury dishes in two or three of the Christmas books. He saw I was enjoying myself and appeared to be delighted.

The conversation, if not remarkable, was amusing. The Hon. Mr Townshend was a man of title and property, and a minor poet. He was quiet and refined. Wilkie Collins discoursed pleasantly about food and thought there was little or nothing in cookery – although he knew and understood French and Italian dishes – that could beat a well-made, well-cooked apple pudding...Mark Lemon was a fat, cheery man, not very refined, with eyes not as keen as Dickens's, but with a similar twinkle. Wilkie Collins wore glasses and was very quiet and amiable. Theatrical matters were touched upon. (John Hollingshead *My Lifetime*, London 1895, II, pp. 98-99).

There is no mention of this dinner in Wilkie's own letters. But a week later he declined meeting the Icelandic poet Grímur Thomsen on the grounds that

I have had a sad accident to my ankle – a severe sprain which has quite crippled me, and which still keeps me an invalid in the doctor's hands. In consequence of this misfortune, I shall miss the pleasure of making Mr Grímur Thomsen's acquaintance. I have written to him to apologise for myself and to tell him how unfit I am now, even for the pleasantest society. (to Hans Christian Andersen, 1 February 1858)

Wilkie had sprained his ankle (he always spelt it 'anle') on his walking tour with Dickens in Cumberland in September 1857. But according to Hollingshead's account he was fit a week earlier to go to a dinner on the top floor of the *Household Words* office. The ankle may have been a handy excuse not to meet Andersen's fellow countryman.

NEW MAGDALEN – A NEW EDITION

A lovely new edition of *The New Magdalen* has been published by Persephone Books of London. A paperback with a wrapper and with endpapers based on a woven silk design dating from 1871. A bookmark in the same design is included. It is not annotated but has an interesting Preface by the English film director James Bobin (*Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016) and *The Muppets* (2011)). Bobin has also work on *Da Ali G Show* and claims co-authorship of the character of Ali G, Borat, and Brüno. A long-time fan he and his wife named their youngest son Wilkie. The Preface begins with an anecdote from Wilkie's own 'Reminiscences of a Story-teller' published in the *Universal Review* in 1888. In it he recalls sitting on a train while opposite him a young lady secretly reads *The New Magdalen* while her father, a vicar, sleeps. A few details in the preface are not quite right but overall it is a nice introduction. *The New Magdalen* by Wilkie

Collins is priced at £13 and available from PersephoneBooks.co.uk ISBN 9781910263280.

THE NEW MAGDALEN – THE FILM

A film adaptation of Collins's 1873 novel and play *The New Magdalen* is in production in France. Called *La place d'une autre* the plot summary will sound familiar to Wilkie fans:

The script centres on Nélie, who escaped a miserable existence by becoming a nurse on the front in 1914. One day, she takes on the identity of Rose, a well-to-do young woman who died under her eyes. Nélie, pretending to be the dead woman, visits Madame de Lengwil (Azéma), an extremely rich woman she begins to work for as a reader. The lie works a charm, exceeding her expectations. Nélie does not only find a roof over her head, but also what she has been missing her entire life: love. But one day, the dead woman resurfaces..."

Filming began in Nancy on 22 October, moved to Alsace, and will end in December in the Vosges. Adapted by Aurélia Georges and Maud Ameline and performed in French, it will be distributed internationally and hopefully a subtitled version will be made available. No release date has as yet been set. More details can be found at www.cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/395159.

The original two volume novel has a plot that is easily adapted for stage and screen. Wilkie's stage version of the 1873 story was probably his most widely produced play. It ran for 113 performances from 19 May to 27 September 1873 at the Olympic theatre in London with Ada Cavendish as Mercy Merrick and Frank Archer as Julian Gray. A provincial tour followed. The play was revived in London in 1875 at the Charing Cross theatre and again in 1884 at the Novelty theatre. It was also widely performed in America opening in New York with Carlotta Leclercq as Mercy Merrick – a performance attended by Wilkie in person during his 1873-74 American reading tour. It was later performed in Boston and around the USA and was even produced in Australia.

WILKIE ON THE RADIO

BBC Radio 4extra is one of our favourite radio stations as they frequently repeat dramatisations of Collins's novels and short stories – so well worth checking on their programme schedules. This time, on 5 December, they repeated 'The Man in White' first broadcast in July 2010. Written as a (not very funny) comedy by Martyn Wade, it features Wilkie as a character while suffering from writer's block. Presented in a rather confused way, it nevertheless throws in quite a few biographical snippets, dwelling on laudanum in the guise of the real life Battley's

Sedative Solution. It also mentions Wilkie's 'gout in the eyes', his living in Albany Street, together with his dislike of marriage. There were also direct quotations from the crossroads meeting in *The Woman in White* and his writing technique from the much later 'How I write my Books'. No epic drama but you may still be able to find it on BBC Sounds.

WHO READ WILKIE'S BOOKS?

Wilkie Collins was always curious about who read his books and he wanted them to reach as wide an audience as possible. A finely bound edition of *My Miscellanies* (1863) has given us an insight into one his readers.

On 4 February 1881 retired cotton spinner Robert Taylor took his first edition of *My Miscellanies* (1863) by Wilkie Collins and inscribed in a neat copperplate hand at the top of the first page in both volumes:

Robert Taylor, Polefield Cottage, Prestwich near Manchester. February 4 1881.

Living with him were two of his daughters. Miriam, then aged 29, who was his housekeeper, and Mary Hague (named after her grandfather), 21, who would soon marry, as well as his elder son, James, who at the age of 26 was 'out of employ'. The cotton industry was going through a difficult time.

Robert Taylor (1825-1889) was an almost exact contemporary of Wilkie Collins. Born in Oldham, Lancashire he was a cotton man through and through. His father James was a cotton twiner and he got Robert work as a book-keeper in a mill – hence his neat hand – before he moved on to become a cotton spinner. Spinners worked autonomously in the mills employing their own men and women – Robert himself employed 21 hands in a mill in Oldham at the time of the April 1861 census.

In 1848 he had married Mary Hague, then aged 19 or 20, the daughter of a well-known Oldham butcher. They had five children, the last two of whom took Mary's family name as their middle one. In the winter of 1867 Mary died in her late thirties of lung congestion. His second daughter Miriam, then 16, took on the role of looking after the household. Shortly after his wife's death Robert moved with Miriam and the two youngest children Mary Hague and Robert Hague, to work in a mill in north Wales. The April 1871 census describes him as a Master Cotton Spinner living with Miriam, 19, and the two younger children aged 11 and 9.

His eldest daughter, Amelia Jane, and elder son James had stayed in Oldham to live with their aunt Betty Drake. In 1872 Amelia Jane married a solicitor and the marriage was witnessed by her father and both her sisters. Aunt Betty died in February 1873 potentially leaving James homeless and shortly after that Robert Taylor returned with his children to his roots in Lancashire.

In January 1880 Robert Taylor's youngest son, Robert Hague Taylor, then aged 17, was convicted of stealing watches from a jeweller on two occasions and served six months in jail. Shortly after completing his sentence in August 1880 the now 18-year-old emigrated to Michigan in the USA for a fresh start. He became a Federal Customs Inspector.

In 1883 Robert's youngest daughter Mary Hague also married a solicitor and early in 1884 she presented Robert with his first grandchild, Phyllis Mary. In November that year the out of work James followed his brother to America almost certainly taking with him his father's inscribed copy of *My Miscellanies*. He lived with his brother in Michigan until his unexpected death in 1903, aged 48, from heart disease. The book stayed in the family.

Back in England, Robert was now left alone with his daughter, Miriam, and he moved with her in the mid-1880s to 51 Liverpool Road, Irlam, south west of Manchester where he died of a stroke on 4 April 1889. He was surrounded by his three daughters and the only grandchild he would ever see – the five year old Phyllis Mary. He was 63.

His first grandson, who had been born just a few months earlier in Michigan, kept the family names as Robert Hague Taylor Jr. He died in 1921 at the age of 33 from heart disease so when his father died in 1935 aged 72 the name Robert Taylor came to an end.

At some point after Robert Hague Taylor's death in 1935 the two volumes of *My Miscellanies* were acquired by a book collector and, with around 25 other first editions of Wilkie's works, expensively rebound by Henry Stikeman in New York, in the 1940s or 50s. After the collector's death they were sold in 2007 by a US auction house and brought back to England by a London dealer, from whom they were acquired in 2020.

Such was the fate of one of Wilkie's early readers Robert Taylor, Master Cotton Spinner of Oldham, Lancashire and his first edition of *My Miscellanies*.

WHODUNNIT?

Because of his well-deserved reputation with *The Moonstone*, Wilkie Collins is often invoked when detective fiction is discussed. Here are some recent examples:

This review of the latest success on Sky: *The Undoing* <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/nov/27/the-undoing-perfect-whodunnit-gripping-more-than-one-nation>

A centenary tribute to Agatha Christie <https://theboar.org/2020/11/100-years-of-agatha-christie>.

He was also mentioned in passing in this essay on favourite detectives (not one of Wilkie's but he is still mentioned!) <https://theconversation.com/my-favourite-detective-kurt-wallander-too-grumpy-to-like-relatable-enough-to-get-under-your-skin-149277>.

He features in this guide to reading Gothic literature <https://www.publicradiotulsa.org/post/gothic-lit-2020s-perfect-october-read#stream/0>.

Finally, why are today's baddies so essentially misunderstood instead of evil like Count Fosco? <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/turning-pages-creating-better-baddies-20201109-p56csl.html>.

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