



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2001

MAGNETIC EVENINGS

Enclosed with this newsletter is the Society's latest reprint, 'Magnetic Evenings at Home'. These essays were first published in *The Leader* early in 1852 and have never been republished since. The couplet quoted is from *The Princess* by Tennyson and the Shakespeare quotation is from *Hamlet*

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF WALTER BESANT'S DEATH IN JUNE 1901

The latest issue of *The Author* (Summer 2001) noted that 9 June 2001 was the 100th anniversary of the death of Walter Besant who completed Wilkie's last, unfinished novel *Blind Love*. Besant was a long-standing friend of Wilkie, founder and Chairman of the recently formed Society of Authors, and social reformer. He promoted the People's Palace at Mile End in east London 'for intellectual improvement and rational amusement' in 1889. As a result of journalist Harry Quilter's efforts, the People's Palace (later Queen Mary's College) became the home of the 'Wilkie Collins Memorial Library of Fiction' consisting of about 1,100 novels. Besant was a popular novelist in his own right collaborating with James Rice on several best-selling books between 1871 and 1882. He also contributed twelve Christmas numbers to *All the Year Round* from 1876 to 1887. Besant was responsible for founding *The Author*, published monthly from May 1890 by Wilkie's agent, A. P. Watt. The second issue (vol. 1, no. 2, June 1890) reprinted Collins's 1880 protest against literary piracy, 'Thou shalt not Steal': Considerations on the Copyright Question Addressed to an American Friend.'

In August 1889, Collins realised that he was too ill to finish *Blind Love*, then being serialised in *The Illustrated London News*. Wilkie suggested that his literary agent, A. P. Watt, should approach Besant: “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.” Wilkie had completed the first 48 chapters (weekly parts 1-18 in *The Illustrated London News*) and had worked out the remainder of the plot. Besant agreed to complete the novel and was surprised to find that Collins’s working notes 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.” Besant’s full explanation is found in the preface to *Blind Love*.

FOXWOLD SALE -A WILKIE AND CHARLES PAINTING

Continuing the theme of *Blind Love*, 26 June saw the sale of Foxwold, a large country house and estate near Westerham in Kent. This was originally the home of wealthy man-about-town and lawyer, Horace Pym. The house has recently been sold by his descendants with an asking price of £2 million followed in June by a sale of the residual contents. An earlier sale in April 1996 included Pym’s hand written notes sent to Wilkie before he started the novel. These details were included in Pym’s own memoirs, *A Tour Round My Bookshelves* which was privately printed in 1891. The plot of *Blind Love* was based on an insurance scam known as the Von Scheurer Fraud in 1883-1884. Wilkie heard about this case from Pym over lunch at his great friends, the Lehmanns, in December 1887. He was so excited by the case that he immediately wanted to jot down the details for future use. Two days later Pym sent him the complete history of the fraud but Wilkie was unable to start work on it until he had completed the serialisation of *The Legacy of Cain*. *Blind Love* was the third title for the story, originally known as *Iris* and as late as May 1889 as *The Lord Harry*.

The main item of interest in the current sale was the double portrait by Andrew Geddes (1783-1844) of Wilkie and Charles Collins aged respectively nine and five. It is a large oil painting, measuring with the frame about 4’ 6” by 3’ 6”, and shows the brothers wearing matching red tunics and white trousers against a landscape setting. The portrait was purchased by Pym at the Christie’s sale of Wilkie’s paintings in February 1890 and subsequently exhibited at the Victorian Exhibition of 1892. Black and white photographs of the picture are included in Catherine Peter’s *The King of Inventors* and in Andrew Gasson’s *Wilkie Collins –An Illustrated Guide*.

SOME ART NOTES

Another, rather more major sale was also held on 26 June at Thornton Manor, Wirral. This was the Sotheby's auction of the renowned Leverhulme Collection. The report of the sale results showed some astonishing prices but perhaps none more than Lot 405. This was a portrait of *Flossie* by Kate Perugini, Dickens's daughter and Wilkie's sister-in-law. The estimate of £8-12,000 was surpassed tenfold with a price of £121,200.

GUILDHALL ART GALLERY

Omitted from an earlier Newsletter was a note from Faith Clarke, the Society's Patron. She wrote "I was interested to learn from a recent Newsletter that two paintings of my great, great grandfather, William Collins, could now be seen at the newly opened Guildhall Art Library in the City of London. Previously the only time you could see one of them, *Borrowdale*, was as you climbed the stairs at the Mansion House at a Lord Mayor's reception. It is unlikely that two others, sold to the Prince Regent, one in July 1818 and the other in January 1826, will go on show since they are now in York House, St James's Place. The last time I saw one of these it was hanging behind the desk of Prince Charles' Private Secretary."

Paul Lewis now adds: There are six paintings by William Collins owned by the Guildhall Art Gallery in London. *A Nutting Party* (1831) and *Scene in Borrowdale, Cumberland* (1821) are on display. *The Sale of a Pet lamb* (1813), *Barmouth Sands* (1835), *Shrimp Boys at Cromer* (1816), and *The Kitten Deceived* (1817) are not. The display is rotated so that they should all be seen at some point. Images of all six can be found using the search facility on <http://collage.1thil.com>. And two more William Collins pictures have been put on display at the Henry Cole Wing of the Victoria and Albert Museum - altogether eight are shown on two floors, as well as a picture by Wilkie's brother Charles.

ART ON THE LINE

Two major works by Wilkie's father William Collins will go on display in London in October. The Courtauld Institute Gallery now occupies the rooms in Somerset House, Strand, that the Royal Academy occupied between 1780 and 1836. William was an Associate of the Academy from 1814 and a full member from 1820. His pictures were shown at its annual exhibition every year from 1807. The Courtauld is recreating those days in a major display called Art On The Line. The Fine Rooms on the top floor, including the Great Room where the annual exhibition took place, will be filled with 300 pictures first shown there

between 1780 and 1836. Two William Collins pictures will be included:— *The Reluctant Departure* (1815), normally on display in Birmingham City Art Gallery, and one of William's most famous works, *Rustic Civility*, oddly known now as *Coming Events*. That has been lent by the present Duke of Devonshire. The 6th Duke bought it from the Royal Academy exhibition in 1832 for 250 guineas. Also in the exhibition will be pictures by Wilkie's relative Andrew Geddes and his godfather David Wilkie after whom he was named. The exhibition will run from 18 October until 20 January and cost £8 to see. More information from the Courtauld 020 7848 2526 or on <https://courtauld.ac.uk/>

CREATIVE QUARTERS

There were two Collins connections in an exhibition at the London Museum on artists in London which closed on 15 July. The 1835 section featured Collins Farm, Northend, Hamsstead where William Collins stayed before Wilkie was born. Sadly, William's work was not represented. But his friend and neighbour John Linnell had several works included as did Augustus Egg, including a self-portrait as David Fallen in Bulwer Lytton's play *Not So Bad as We Seem*. This was the first play Wilkie acted in with Dickens in 1851. An image of this picture and details of the exhibition can still be found on the Museum's website www.museum-london.org.uk/MOLsite/menu.htm.

ALLY SLOPER

The Character of Ally Sloper was invented in 1867 by Charles Henry Ross, a writer of Penny Dreadfuls, but only achieved real fame after 1884 after Ross had sold the character to Gilbert Dalziel of the Dalziel family which published *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* for some 40 years. Sloper was an amiable con-man whose full name was Alexander Sloper F.O.M (Friend of Man). Through Dalziel he established a reciprocal order for distinguished readers known as The Friends of Sloper, sending out certificates entitling the holder to style himself F. O. S.

The latest Catalogue 1309 from booksellers Maggs Brothers features an interesting item about Ally Sloper, "an album of letters of acknowledgement for the award of the F. O. S. title. The album contains the letters of gratitude that Dalziel received from a cross-section of late Victorian society between 1885 and 1887 who mostly entered into the humorous spirit of the award. Artists included Millais, Alma-Tadema, John Singer Sargent, Edward Poynter and Luke Fildes (illustrator of *The Law and the Lady* and *Miss or Mrs?*). Other areas well represented are the theatre and the music hall.

Wilkie Collins received his award of F. O. S. early in 1886. His letter of thanks is not included in the present album since it is located in the Stanford University Libraries. It was published with five others and an introduction by J. Terry Bender as *Six Letters of Wilkie Collins from the Charlotte Ashley Felton Memorial Library*, San Francisco 1957. The book, which can still be found for sale at a reasonable price on internet book sites, consists of facsimiles together with their transcriptions. The Collins letter is dated 23 February 1886 and was published in the *Half Holiday* for Saturday 6 March 1886. The following is the actual text:

To Ally Sloper, Friend of Man.

Illustrious Sir,

After more than thirty years experience in the use of his pen, the undersigned finds himself incapable of expressing the emotions of pride pleasure and gratitude with which he has received the Award of Merit, and the permission to add to his name F.O.S. In this difficulty he submits his heart to Sloper, and confidently leaves that true Philanthropist to draw his own conclusions. At the same time, the undersigned begs to remark that the Award of Merit (with the autograph that accompanies it) is superior to all other awards in this respect - that it is useful as well as ornamental. When the Social revolution passes this way, W.C. will appear in his balcony - will exhibit his diploma - and will save his windows. In the meantime visitors will be invited to view the autograph. Young people (provided with their copy books) will learn what a truly free and noble handwriting really is. And correspondents, guilty of that last and lowest form of human conceit which consists in writing illegible signatures, will be referred to the Sloper-signature, and will be instructed to follow the Sloper-example.

Illustrious Sir, Your grateful servant to command,

Wilkie Collins F.O.S.

WILKIE AT WAITROSE

Wilkie lived most of his life in central London's Marylebone area, the heart of which is the recently revitalised High Street. Part of this redevelopment is the newly constructed Waitrose food supermarket. The right hand wall inside the main entrance consists of tiled illustrations of the area surrounded by local residents from the past such as Gladstone, Turner, Faraday, Browning and Dickens. Wilkie is of course included and almost has a place of honour in being placed at the lower right corner and easily visible through the main window. It is certainly not the finest portrait you will ever see but there is at least a perceivable likeness whereas the Dickens is virtually unrecognisable. It is a nice touch to find Wilkie remembered in his own high street but a shame Waitrose don't sell a Scottish cheese called *Armadale*.

‘THE WOMAN IN WHITE TELEVISION SCREENING

About twenty-five members and guests attended the screening of the 1982 television version of *The Woman in White* on 29 April. The quality of this production was in a different league to the more recent attempt by the BBC. Although virtually the entire assembled company already knew the story and the complete five episodes lasted a little under five hours, everyone in the room remained spellbound to the end. A serialisation of this length had the advantage of being able to keep faithfully to the original story, develop some depth to the characters and retain a large part of Collins’s original dialogue.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Woman in White currently features as part of the Open University course, the 19th Century Novel. Chapters 3 and 4 of the OU textbook *Identities* are by Valerie Pedlar. ‘*The Woman in White: sensationalism, secrets and spying*’ (pp. 48-68) has sections on ‘Sensationalism and Gothic’, ‘The terrors of the country-house’, ‘Serial-reading, secrets and spying’, ‘Narrative method: taking control in a determinist world’ and ‘Sensation and realism: reading for pleasure or reading for profit’. Chapter 4, ‘Drawing a blank: the construction of identity in *The Woman in White*’ (pp. 79-94), devotes itself to ‘*The Woman in White* and melodrama’, ‘Heroines: the significance of doubling in *The Woman in White*, ‘Images of confinement and control’, and ‘Identity and gender’. Both chapters contain a useful bibliography of works cited and further reading. There is also an accompanying Reader for the course and Chapter 8 of this is also devoted to *The Woman in White*.

THE LITERARY ENCYCLOPAEDIA

The Literary Encyclopaedia is a large co-operative venture evolving on the internet at www.literaryencyclopaedia.com. It currently claims about 4,500 literary authors from all over the world together with some 7,000 major works and 1,000 historical events or critical topics. Many of the entries are as yet incomplete but the index is nevertheless useful to see what works may have been written in a particular year or generate a list of writers according to various search criteria or key words. The eventual aim of the *Encyclopaedia* is to provide biographies and text profiles of 500 to 2,500 words for all important authors and works in the English language together with notes on philosophers and historical events which have had an impact on literary culture. The work is growing rapidly so that more than 300 scholars have already agreed to write between them some two million words. Scholars interested in contributing to the *Encyclopaedia* are invited to write to editors@literaryencyclopaedia.com.

BIBLIOMANIA

Bibliomania claims to be the world's leading digital library with over 2,000 texts free online. The 'read' section of the site presents a library of the "best in world literature, both in English and English translation." Each author has his or her own author page with a detailed biography and links to web resources. New books are being added every month. There is also a 'study' section to further the understanding of the texts with a series of study-guides. Further details are to be seen at www.bibliomania.com.

FAVOURITE TALES OF THE FANTASTICAL

Devotees of the paranormal may be interested in having a signed copy of Peter Underwood's *Favourite Tales of the Fantastical*. Peter Underwood is a prolific author and renowned ghost hunter. There is no actual story by Collins – perhaps in a future collection – but the book features rare tales of the weird and wonderful by several contemporaries, including Charles Dickens, Bram Stoker, Ambrose Bierce, Mrs Oliphant, Edith Nesbit, R. L. Stevenson and Sheridan Le Fanu. The collection is published at £9.99 (\$15) plus p & p £1.75 (\$5) by Derby Publishing, 16 School Road, Haslemere, Surrey, GU27 3RN (Tel. 01428 652320;email derbypublishing@aol.com).

THE DARK CLUE

Wilkie has featured in several pastiche novels set in the 19th century, but *The Dark Clue* by James Wilson is the first to feature characters from his work. Wilson imagines a sequel to *The Woman in White* in which Walter Hartright, aided by Marian Halcombe, research the life of the painter J. M. W. Turner. Laura plays a suitably minor role. The rest of the characters in the book are historical – such as Charles Eastlake, president of the Royal Academy. Wilson, either knowingly or otherwise, uses locations which would have been familiar to Collins such as Portland Place, close to where he was born, Avenue Road where he lived, and Church Row Hampstead, where he did not live but which some histories wrongly say he did. The book is set in 1854 – though Wilson does not tell us so, it is the only year in the 1850s which fits the calendar. The first half proceeds well enough, but the end degenerates, as Victorian pastiches so often do, into a sexual miasma into which Hartright plunges following the dark clues about Turner's life. Finally, Walter ends up with nervous exhaustion, Marian rescues him and they then return to Limmeridge to resume their *ménage à trois*, which Marian at least, admits is her desire. A mixed book, enjoyable in parts, ridiculous in others, but not the gripping thriller the blurb promises. James Wilson, *The Dark Clue*, Faber and Faber, London 2001 ISBN 0-571-20271-3.

PSYCHOANALYZING WILKIE

Wilkie Collins Society member Dr. Alexander Grinstein has produced a psychoanalytical study of Wilkie which will be published shortly. He writes "It

provides insight into the complexities of Collins's personality and delineates some of the underlying problems with which he struggled all his life." *Wilkie Collins: Man of Mystery and Imagination* is due out in October from International Universities Press, ISBN 0-823-66681-6 and can be pre-ordered from www.amazon.com.

OTHER BOOKS

A new edition of *The Moonstone* is due out from Random House in their Modern Library series on 27 September. It is edited by author Caleb Carr (*The Alienist, Killing Time*) with notes by detective fiction specialist Chris Willis ISBN 0-375-75785-6. Chris is also doing the notes for a new *The Woman in White*, (edited by Anne Perry who wrote the Victorian murder mystery *Ashworth Hall*), also from Random House and due out early next year. The BBC is promising a new audio cassette version of *The Woman in White* in November - ISBN 0-563-53518-0.

NEW E-TEXTS

James Rusk has added one more Wilkie book to his extensive collection of e-texts. *Basil* is now available and *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret* are promised for early next year. You can see all his material on <http://free.freespeech.org/wcollins> though he will be moving it shortly because of the annoying pop-up adverts which freespeech now inserts. A full classified list of all the available Wilkie e-texts is held on www.wilkiecollins.com. A curious and not very accurate French site on Wilkie has appeared at <http://authologies.free.fr/collins.htm> and several pictures of Wilkie's grave can now be found on <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/1934/wilkie-collins>. A short history and a nice old image of St Marylebone church where Wilkie was christened on 10 February 1824 is at www.stmarylebone.org.uk.

'A TERRIBLY STRANGE BED' -THE FILM

A film version of Wilkie's story 'A Terribly Strange Bed' has turned up. Originally made in 1973 for the series *Orson Welles Great Mysteries*, the 24 minute colour film starred Edward Albert as Charles Faulkner with Colin Baker as his friend and Rupert Davies as the old soldier. Director Alan Cooke has closely followed the plot of the story, though he loses the tension of the slow realisation of the bed slowly moving down. The melodramatic introduction and conclusion by Welles is wonderfully well done. The film, which was shown on Anglia TV in the UK, is not included in any standard reference works and to that extent has been rediscovered. The story was originally published in *Household Words* in April 1852 and was subsequently included by Wilkie in *After Dark* 1856. Wilkie claimed it was based on a true story, or at least one told to him as true. It has remained an enduring favourite among his tales, turning up in many collections of horror or mystery stories.