



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2001

WCS JOURNAL 2001

Enclosed with this Newsletter is Volume 4 of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, now produced in the more standard A5 format. As ever, we are grateful for the editorial skills of Graham Law and Lillian Nayder and to the authors of the various essays. This year's contributions include articles on suicide in Collins's crime fiction, two different aspects of *Lady Audley 's Secret* and a wide selection of book reviews.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Membership Secretary Paul Lewis has a new address. It is now 4 Ernest Gardens, Chiswick, London W4 3QU email paul@paullewis.co.uk tel 020 8747 0115.

THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS

Following the notes in our last Newsletter about the hundredth anniversary of the death of Walter Besant, details have recently been unearthed of the dinner held on 25 July 1888 to 'American Men & Women' at the Criterion Restaurant, Piccadilly. Wilkie was a keen supporter of the Society and for a while one of its stewards. This was his last appearance at such a major function. Remembering the kindly and hospitable welcome during his US tour in 1873-1874 and the dinner in his honour at the Lotos Club of New York, he would certainly have been keen to attend. The toasts of the evening included (1) The Queen and the President of the United States, proposed by the Chairman (Professor James Bryce) with a response by Consul-General Waller; (2) Literature, proposed by the Chairman and replied to by J. Russell Lowell; (3) The Incorporated Society of Authors, proposed by Mr Brandler Matthews with a response by Walter Besant as

Chairman of the Executive Committee; (4) American Men and Women of Letters, with separate toasts for Science, Poets and Novelists.

The printed table plan shows that Collins was duly placed on the top table, seated between Mrs Frances Hodgson Burnett and Professor S. P. Langley. The total company consisted of nearly 150 diners and included Oscar Wilde, W. M. Rosetti, William Black, A. P. Watt, Edmund Yates, George Meredith, Bret Harte, Edmund Gosse and J. McNeal Whistler. In those days dinners were real dinners and the nine courses included Hors d'oeuvres; Consommé Rossini; Truite Saumoné; Poulet de Grain à la Stanley; Filet de Boeuf au Madère; Caneton roti; Charlotte Russe; Whitebait; and Fraise Crème Glacée with coffee.

Incidentally, membership of the Society of Authors is open to all with an interest in writing and publishing. The advice from their experts on contracts is particularly valuable and anyone with thoughts of producing a book or writing for periodicals, radio or television will find the relatively modest cost of membership extremely worthwhile.

THE ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

The WCS continues to be affiliated to the Alliance of Literary Societies which has provided advance details of next year's Conference weekend and AGM on Saturday 27 and Sunday 28 April. The annual meeting is sponsored each year by a different society and 2001 will be arranged by the Arnold Bennett Society which is celebrating the centenary of the publication of *Anna of the Five Towns*. Events will take place in and around Burslem, Lancashire with a varied programme of talks, film screenings, walks and visits to local potteries. Further details at this stage from ALS secretary, Rosemary Culley, at 22 Belmont Grove, Havant, Hampshire PO9 3PU (023 9247 5855; rosemary@sndc.demon.co.uk).

WILKIE IN THE PRESS

The Times on 30 November carried a piece comparing today's TV soaps with the sensation fiction of Dickens, Gaskell and Wilkie Collins: "Those artists, like today's soap scriptwriters, wrote primarily to entertain but also sometimes to campaign." It nevertheless reminded us of the now discredited Swinburne couplet:

"What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?
Some demon whispered – 'Wilkie! Have a mission'"

Tim Adams in *The Observer* (11 November 2001) reviewing the TV version of *The Way We Live Now* claims that Trollope was a major writer whereas Wilkie Collins wrote 'minor works'. *The Washington Post* (17/6/01) is similarly disrespectful using the phrase "the 'lesser Dickens', Wilkie Collins."

The *Bristol Evening Post* recalled the 150th anniversary of the performance on 12 November 1851 of Bulwer Lytton's play *Not So Bad as We Seem* to 1,400 people at the Victoria Rooms, Clifton. Wilkie Collins played a small part in the play. They stayed at the Bath Hotel, Clifton. The play had first been put on earlier in the year and it was then that Wilkie met Dickens for the first time. The performances raised money for the Guild of Literature and Art, a charity which helped writers and artists fallen on hard times.

The *Western Mail* (28/9/01) reveals that Manorbier Castle near Tenby was one of the locations used in 1997 for what it calls the "little-seen film" of *Basil*.

Jonathan Myerson (*Independent* 24/9/01) dismisses recent scholarship to say that Wilkie Collins did not launch the detective story. His books, he says, are more whydunits than whodunits. He gives the credit to Edgar Allan Poe and then Conan Doyle, who made the detective story respectable.

El Pais (22/9/01) gave a long biographical account with a photograph to mark the first publication in Spanish of *la Reina del Mal* (*The Evil Genius*) pointing out it was a 'minor work' though 'carried off beautifully'. Six weeks earlier (4/8/01) it carried a similarly long review of *Sin Nombre* (*No Name*).

The usual crop of book reviews refer to Wilkie Collins, usually comparing the new book, favourably or not, with his work. The reviewer Helen Brown (*The Daily Telegraph* 4/8/01) confesses that "the first writer to have me suffocating with suspense was Wilkie Collins." And she claims the American writer Glen David Gold is "his match".

Author Patrick Gale told the *Daily Mail* (3/8/01) that he was reading *Armada* "a wonderful baleful thriller involving murder, impersonation, dreams, fate, true love, blood brotherhood and one of the wickedest women ever created" ...Can't think why no one has filmed it yet." Here here! And another writer, Adam Thorpe, puts *No Name* as his top novel "disturbing, thrillingly plotted, way ahead of its time yet bizarrely overlooked."

Finally, a piece in the advertising periodical *Campaign* records that the smart bank Coutts had appointed its first advertising agency in 300 years of existence, mentioning its "client list to die for" including Dickens, Chopin, Byron, and Wilkie Collins.

NOT SO BAD AS WE SEEM

Returning to *Not so Bad as We Seem*, there are two items with particular Collins interest in the latest Jarndyce Catalogue CXLV. This is a superb production with over 1800 items devoted to Charles Dickens. Item 1167 (price £500) is an admission ticket to the performance of *Not so Bad as We Seem* at the Lecture Hall, Derby on Wednesday 25 August 1852. The ticket is quite large at 17 x 21.5 cm and is the same design as that used for the original London production. It was designed by Royal Academy artist E. M. Ward whose secret wedding in 1848 had been masterminded by Wilkie and formed the basis of his 1871 novella, *Miss or Mrs?*. Item 1193 in the catalogue relates to the same performance and is the single column playbill printed in red and black (price £850). (Jarndyce at 020 7631 4220)

THE DICKENSIAN

The Jarndyce catalogue lists numerous editions of *The Dickensian* some of which may well contain references to Collins. The latest issue of the journal, however, features a major article by WCS member Carolyn Oulton on ‘A Vindication of Religion: Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens and *The Frozen Deep*’ (Summer 2001, no. 454, vol. 97 part 2, pp. 154-158). Carolyn argues her religious theme against the background of the play where the inspiration of the main characters, Richard Wardour and Frank Aldersley, “is shown to be specifically religious, though mediated through the channel of human support” and “...evil which he himself embodies, is presented by Wardour in terms of a Christian miracle.” For Collins, “the influence of religion is felt through a personal response to temptation, whereas Dickens sees it operating as a unifying force among a group holding similar ‘manly’ values.”

SOME OTHER COLLINS ANNIVERSARIES IN DECEMBER

150 years: 17 December 1851 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Mr Wray’s Cash-Box* by Richard Bentley. This rather sentimental story is currently scheduled as a Christmas reading by the Wilkie Collins List (wilkiecollins@yahoogroups.com).

As a totally irrelevant aside, 17 December 1911 was the date on which Captain Scott and his four companions left the South Pole to begin their doomed return journey northwards. A copy of *The Illustrated London News* can still be seen on Scott’s table in the hut at Cape Evans on the Ross Sea.

140 years: Collins contributes ‘Picking up Waifs at Sea’ as Chapter 4 of Tom Tiddler’s Ground in the Xmas number of *All The Year Round*. This was later republished as ‘The Fatal Cradle’ and for today’s diet conscious

times begins with the immortal line ‘My weight has been the grand misfortune of my life.’

130 years: *Miss or Mrs?* is published in *The Graphic* on 25 December 1871.

120 years: Collins makes a formal agreement on 10 December 1881 with A. P. Watt, the first literary agent.

THE LETTERS OF WILKIE COLLINS

The Public Face of Wilkie Collins will collect together chronologically all the known letters of Wilkie Collins. Those already published in *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* (Baker and Clarke, Macmillan 1999) will be listed but without the text. All the others will be published in full with notes and introductory essays relating Collins’s life to his correspondence. The editors will be Professor William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Professor Graham Law, and Paul Lewis. The 3 volume book will be published by Pickering and Chatto in March 2005 price £295.

Many new letters have already come to light. Anyone with information to share about Wilkie Collins’s letters should contact Paul Lewis at the Wilkie Collins Society.

SOME RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOKS

The Haunted Looking Glass is a selection of ghost stories, including Collins’s ‘The Dream Woman’, chosen and illustrated by the artist Edward Gorey (1925-2000). This classic book has been reprinted by the New York Review of Books (ISBN 0-940322-68-4) and costs \$12.95.

Ian Cunningham’s *A Reader’s Guide to Writers’ London* (Prion 2001) is a well researched and wonderfully illustrated guide to the districts and buildings of London with literary connections. Wilkie Collins is well represented with a two page biography which exaggerates his life. There is a fine Sarony picture, a paragraph on the location of the crossroads where Walter Hartright meets Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* and an interesting mention of a restaurant in Greenwich where Dickens and Collins ate dinner to celebrate completing another literary work. (ISBN 1-85375-425-0 price £20).

Inventing the Victorians by Matthew Sweet (Faber and Faber, 2001, £16.99 ISBN 0-571-20658-1) is an iconoclastic look at the Victorian era. He takes the strait-laced, sexually moral, sober, hardworking image and turns it on its

head – showing the Victorians were not like that at all and not very different from our own times. He also shows us what we owe the Victorians who “invented the theme park, the shopping mall, the movies, the amusement arcade, the roller-coaster, the crime novel and the sensational newspaper story.” He might have added instant global communication, the motor car, and photography. Wilkie Collins gets 13 references in the text the best referring to the new, brashly decorated house of the Sherwins in *Basil* and the longest describing his friendship with the 12 year old Nannie Wynne. Even Wilkie’s brother Charles gets a mention with an approving quotation from his work. A fascinating book which was summarized by Sweet – including references to Wilkie Collins – in a long piece in *The Independent on Sunday* magazine on 21 October.

WOMAN IN WHITE

An excellent production of *The Woman in White* on BBC Radio 4 is now also available on cassette. The dramatisation by Martin Wade shows how a great book can be made to come to life if you follow three simple rules - keep the story, keep the characters, and keep the language. It should make the recent TV dramatisers of Collins – who changed the plot, threw out almost all the language, and barely kept the characters – thoroughly ashamed. Broadcast in four one hour episodes each Sunday from 11 November 2001 it starred Toby Stevens as Walter Hartright and Juliet Aubrey as Marian Halcombe. All the acting was excellent and evoked not only the sense of Victorian England but the claustrophobia and fear of Collins’s seminal sensation novel. Reviews were universally good in *The Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Stage*, and this by Ken Garner in the *Express on Sunday*: “Martyn Wade’s dramatisation preserves Wilkie Collins’s series of first-person narratives, particularly unsettling on radio where in a scary landscape we need to cling to a trustworthy voice. Cherry Cookson’s direction and Elizabeth Parker’s creepy music complete the shameless, melodramatic effect.” The cassette is published by BBC Worldwide, price £9.99.

CHARLES COLLINS’S GRAVE

Wilkie’s brother Charles was buried in Brompton Cemetery, Old Brompton Road, London SW5. The only known reference to his grave is in the chapter on his life by S. M. Ellis in his book *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and others* (London 1931), where he writes (p.73) “His grave is covered by a flat granite slab on which it is just possible to decipher his name and the dates of his birth and death. There is no text or inscription to record who he was or what he did: inadequate recognition in death as in life.”

Ellis was right about the text of the inscription, which simply reads Charles Allston Collins. Born 28th January 1828. Died 9th April 1873. But the text and the granite slab are clean and clear. You can find it in Section E. From the North-east corner go south down the broad path, past two cedars on the right, and then about nine plots before the third cedar, go right (west) to the third row in. You don't need a compass – the cemetery has maps on posts with the directions marked.

A NEW WILKIE PIECE

A previously unrecognized short piece of writing by Wilkie Collins has recently been identified. We now know he wrote the obituary of his father William Collins RA published in the *Art-Union Journal* of April 1847 (p137). That makes it the second earliest of his known published works, the first being 'The Last Stage Coachman' published in *The Illuminated Magazine* in August 1843.

WILLIAM COLLINS

Art on the Line - previewed in the last newsletter - is a largely successful attempt to recreate a crowded, floor-to-ceiling Royal Academy annual exhibition of the late 18th to early 19th century. The Courtauld Institute Gallery in Somerset House, Strand, London now owns the space which the RA occupied from 1780-1836. William Collins was a student there and subsequently a member. He exhibited almost every year from 1807 until his death and two of his works are on show – *The Reluctant Departure* (1815) (currently owned by Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery) and *Rustic Civility* (1832). This latter picture is on loan from the Chatsworth Estate. The exhibition runs until 20 January 2002.

The Reluctant Departure is particularly interesting. The painting shows a young man departing for the Napoleonic Wars leaving behind his wife and baby. Collins's description on p. 69 of vol. I of *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* begins: "In "The Reluctant Departure," the incident of a mother taking leave of her child as it lies in the nurse's arms, ere she descends to a boat in the foreground, which a fisherman and his boy are preparing to push off from the shore, is treated with singular boldness and simplicity of effect." In April 1885, Wilkie presented a copy of his biography to A. P. Watt to which he has appended the following note: "'The Reluctant Departure.'" (1815). The Descriptions of pictures Exhibited before 1823, are taken from my mother's recollections of them on the Royal

Academy walls. In this case, I have evidently mistaken what she told me - and perhaps her memory may also have been a little at fault. On, and after 1823, my mother spoke (and I wrote) of what she had seen in progress in my father's Studio. Her memory - in these cases (tested by old friends of my father who lived to read my Life of him) was declared to be wonderful. 27 Nov^r 1884 W.C."

A smaller copy of *Rustic Civility* (1834) painted for the collector John Sheepshanks can now be seen in the newly opened British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Other works by William Collins are still on show in the museum's Henry Cole Wing. The V&A is now free of charge.

Three more William Collins pictures are getting an airing at the Guildhall Art Gallery in the City of London. *Barmouth Sands* (1835), *Shrimp Boys at Cromer* (1816), and *The Kitten Deceived* (1817) are now on display. The Guildhall owns six Collins pictures and rotates the collection from time to time. Not very good images of them can be found through <http://collage.nhil.com>.

Another major William Collins painting surfaced briefly at Christie's saleroom. *Capstern at Work, Drawing up Fishing Boats* was originally shown at the Royal Academy in 1820. William records that he took seven weeks to paint it, finishing on 8 February. It was sold to Sir T. F. Heathcote for 150 guineas - the original purchaser of two pictures now at The Guildhall - *The Kitten Deceived* and *Shrimp Boys at Cromer*. In 1890 its price had risen to £840, again at Christies. Its estimated price on 30 November 2001 was £15,000-£20,000 but it failed to find a buyer.

BOOKFINDERS

A new edition of the *Register for British Bookfinders* has now been published in a fully revised and enlarged edition. It is in A5 format and lists county by county over 100 businesses offering booksearch services with details of Names, Addresses, Telephone and Fax numbers, e-mail and internet information. It covers the whole of the UK and the price remains the same as the original 1998 edition at £3.99 post free. The Register is available from C. Ambrose Winder, Toronto House, 11 Mayfield Grove, Harrogate, N. Yorkshire HG1 5HD (Tel/fax 01423 566239).

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