

Wilkie Collins – Lunacy on the Isle of Man

Wilkie Collins only visited the Isle of Man once, in August 1863, to do some research for his novel *Armadale*. Caroline Graves and her daughter Harriet went with him. He did not like it there, found what he needed for his book and left within a week. Nuel Pharr Davis in his 1956 biography of Collins suggests that he also played a part in hurrying up the construction of the island's first Lunatic Asylum, which was completed in 1868. This story has been repeated in the notes of recent editions of *Armadale*¹. But new research, on the Isle of Man and elsewhere, finds no evidence for his involvement and that Davis's assertions are wrong in every detail. Here is what he wrote.

Wilkie continued his explorations. Apparently his next step was to sail north out of Bristol with Pigott, his usual yachting companion, to the Isle of Man. Indolently watching the coast, he saw a lunatic caper along the rocks pursued by a farmer and his wife. At Castletown the capital, he learned that this sight was not so uncommon as one might think. Every Manx family was expected to take care of its own insane, with the result that many were kept chained in sheds. Wilkie, though he used the fact in *Armadale*, was not pleased to find material so perfectly suited to its mood. Sir James Gell, the Attorney General, later told Hall Caine about the results of Wilkie's visit. After several letters written by Wilkie to *The Times*, said Sir James, the Home Office told the insular Legislature that if they did not quickly make provision for their indigent lunatics the imperial authorities would do so for them and charge them with the expense.²

Davis was largely repeating a chunk from the autobiography of the Isle of Man writer Hall Caine. He recounts the fact that "lunacy was not rare in our little close community" and explains how badly mentally ill people were treated. That he says

lasted until Wilkie Collins visited the island when he was writing "Armadale," and I remember hearing from a former Attorney-General, Sir James Gell, that after certain letters written by Collins to *The Times*, the Home Office told our insular legislature that if they did not quickly make proper provision for their poor lunatics the imperial authorities would do so and charge them with the expense.³

Sir James Gell was not Attorney General of the island until 1866. In 1863 he was a practising lawyer, a partner in the firm Gell and Gill and High Bailiff of Castletown. On Gell's death in 1905, Hall Caine did say that he was "the oldest of my Manx friends...and taken altogether the best."⁴ However, it seems likely that Caine did not meet Gell until 1887 when he consulted him on legal points for his novel *The Deemster*, the first he set in the Isle of Man.⁵

Davis embellishes Caine's already faulty account. There is no evidence that Wilkie sailed to the Isle of Man on any of his many trips with Pigott. In 1859 he wrote both to his mother and to his friend Charles Ward that he had considered visiting Man for a holiday but had decided against it.

At this moment I don't know where I am going to in August. My last idea of the Isle of Man has been discouraged by competent authorities who tell me I should be

starved there if I went into lodgings and poisoned with execrable wine if I try the Hotels.⁶

And when he wrote in 1863 about his planned trip to the Isle it was not in words of a man who had been there before. He told his mother in July

My next "pitch" (as the strolling players call it) will be the Isle of Man - where I want to look at the scenery &c with a view to my next book.⁷

In August he was still planning the trip, but clearly not sailing with Pigott. Collins was ill at the time and he wrote to his mother "I have tried the sea-experiment, and it has failed." Pigott and he had abandoned a sailing trip after ten days plying along the Dorset and Devonshire coast. He was planning to head for warmer climates in Italy in the autumn. Meanwhile

I am going to the Isle of Man to look at certain localities which I may want to turn to literary account one of these days... Next week will see me on my way to the Isle of Man - to immerse myself in local superstitions and to study the habits of the famous tailless cats of Manx birth and breeding.⁸

Once there he wrote to his friend Ward, confirming he had got there by regular steamer from Liverpool.

I can tell you nothing yet but that the island is very grand from the sea - and that we see the fine Bay of Douglas from our windows. My first excursion is to be made tomorrow - and as soon as I have seen what I want for my purpose I shall come back. It is too late in the year to be visiting northern islands in my rheumatic condition. C. and the child well - passage from Liverpool raining for half the way across, but calm. Crowds in the steamer, crowds here - all Lancashire goes to the Isle of Man, and all Lancashire is capable of improvement in looks and breeding.⁹

And three days later to his mother

There was only one house which could receive me - a house with a bitter cold Easterly aspect...Nothing that I wanted (in the literary way) at this place. Consulted the landlord - and drove off to a remote quarter of the island. Crowds here again - landlord distracted - got rooms at last - and next day started in a boat for the place I wanted to see - the Calf of Man separated from the Island by a Sound. Boat a dirty little fishing boat - crew a man for one oar, and two boys for the other. Pulled out of the bay and found a heavy sea and a smart south west wind. Valiant crew just able to keep the boat's head to the sea, and no more. I saw we should be wet through, and should take hours before we got to our destination. Ordered them to return - and consulted the landlord. "Can't do it landlord." - "I thought not, sir." "Can I get near the place by land?" "Yes sir". "Have you got a carriage?" "Got a jaunting car, sir". "And a horse?" "Yes, Sir". "Put the horse to then". Out came this car with an Irish boy to drive. Set off at a gallop - mounted a hill - descended again by a road all rocks and ruts - I had to get down and walk from sheer inability to bear the jolting. At last we reached the place - wild & frightful, just what I wanted - everything made for my occult literary purposes. I forgave the Isle of Man on the spot - and today I have returned to this hotel. A day or two's rest after all this exertion, will bring my stay here to an end - and I shall be back in London, if all goes well, next week.¹⁰

There is no evidence that Wilkie saw anyone “caper along the rocks”. Davis is sometimes guilty of treating Collins’s fiction as being autobiographical with no supporting evidence.

Armadale capers

Wilkie sets a crucial scene in *Armadale* on the Isle of Man. Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter (whose real name was also Allan Armadale) go sailing in a borrowed boat. They reach the Sound, a narrow passage between the Isle of Man and the small island called the Calf. There is a wrecked ship, run aground between the two land masses (technically the Sound runs between the Calf of Man and a small islet just offshore from the Isle of Man called Kitterland). The two sailors decide to visit the wreck. Once on board the ship, their own boat which was badly tied up, drifts away. The ship, *La Grâce de Dieu*, already the scene of a murder and now the cause of significant dreams by Armadale, plays a pivotal part in the story. As the night passes, the two men get desperate to leave it. Allan calls for help and hears on the Calf a sound “like the distant clash of a heavy door-bolt being drawn back”. He shouted again. And the capering begins.

The shout was not answered, but mimicked with a shrill, shrieking derision—with wilder and wilder cries, rising out of the deep distant darkness, and mingling horribly the expression of a human voice with the sound of a brute's. A sudden suspicion crossed Allan's mind, which made his head swim and turned his hand cold as it held the rigging. In breathless silence he looked toward the quarter from which the first mimicry of his cry for help had come. After a moment's pause the shrieks were renewed, and the sound of them came nearer. Suddenly a figure, which seemed the figure of a man, leapt up black on a pinnacle of rock, and capered and shrieked in the waning gleam of the moonlight. The screams of a terrified woman mingled with the cries of the capering creature on the rock. A red spark flashed out in the darkness from a light kindled in an invisible window. The hoarse shouting of a man's voice in anger, was heard through the noise. A second black figure leapt up on the rock, struggled with the first figure, and disappeared with it in the darkness. The cries grew fainter and fainter—the screams of the woman were stilled—the hoarse voice of the man was heard again for a moment, hailing the wreck in words made unintelligible by the distance, but in tones plainly expressive of rage and fear combined. Another moment, and the clang of the door-bolt was heard again; the red spark of light was quenched in darkness; and all the islet lay quiet in the shadows once more. The lowing of the cattle on the mainland ceased—rose again—stopped. Then, cold and cheerless as ever, the eternal bubbling of the broken water welled up through the great gap of silence—the one sound left, as the mysterious stillness of the hour fell like a mantle from the heavens, and closed over the wreck.

Allan descended from his place in the mizzen-top, and joined his friend again on deck.

“We must wait till the ship-breakers come off to their work,” he said, meeting Midwinter halfway in the course of his restless walk. “After what has happened, I don't mind confessing that I've had enough of hailing the land. Only think of there being a madman in that house ashore, and of my waking him! Horrible, wasn't it?”¹¹

That is the only reference in *Armadale* to a ‘madman’ or how such people were treated.

Pharr-fetched

The other assertions in Davis are equally fragile.

- A search of *The Times* reveals that Wilkie did not write to the newspaper about the state of lunatics on the Isle of Man, or indeed anything else, between July 1863 and December 1864.
- Davis's footnote to Hall Caine's *My Story* p.90 – but that page says nothing about the Isle of Man. In fact the reference is to p.19.
- The row between the Isle of Man and Britain was exactly the opposite to Davis's (and Caine's) portrayal. Although British Government officials in London did try to get the Isle of Man to improve the treatment of what they called Lunatics, there was also strong pressure from within the Isle. London never threatened to build the Asylum and charge Tynwald. If anything, it was London which delayed the plans by refusing for some years to pay a share of the cost which it had already agreed to.

Lunacy policy

So what is left of this story? The Isle of Man is located midway between Ireland and England. It has been a Crown Dependency since 1765. Its laws are made by Tynwald, which claims to be the oldest continuously functioning parliament in the world. But it has never been economically independent of the United Kingdom and the history of its first Lunatic Asylum reflects this uneasy independence.

The Queen is Monarch and her representative is the Lieutenant Governor, an appointed UK official. He is much more than an Ambassador, but much less than a ruler. His relationship to Tynwald is like the Queen's is to Parliament – influential but essentially powerless. During this period Isle of Man had three Governors. The Hon. Charles Hope 1845-60, Francis Stainsby Conant Pigott 1860-63, and Sir Henry Loch 1863-1882.

Concern about the lack of provision for people who were destitute or insane had been expressed as early as 1794¹². Prior to 1847 people who were criminally insane were removed to asylums in England and Scotland but in December that year the Manx Attorney General ruled that their removal contravened the law¹³. On 13 February 1849 Tynwald passed a law allowing a person who was "supposed to be Insane" and who was "at large" to be brought before the magistrates and if the person had "derangement of mind or deficiency of will arising from a defective or vitiated understanding" then they could be committed to Castle Rushen not as a criminal but as "a dangerous person suspected to be Insane"¹⁴.

Since the early 19th century convicted criminals had been confined in the mediaeval Castle Rushen. Under the new law, people who fell within the new definition of criminally insane could be confined there too, though they were supposed to be kept separate from the convicted prisoners. In 1851 a fund was started to build an asylum but not enough money was raised and then that was lost in the long and difficult liquidation of Holmes' Bank, which failed in 1853 after the death of the last partner,

blind and 75 years old, amid accusations of notes being issued well beyond the bank's ability to honour them.¹⁵

In July 1858 Mr Ferrier the prison Chaplain at Castle Rushen and the doctor Thomas Underwood MD, warned Lieutenant Governor Hope, and Tynwald of the appalling conditions for the inmates who had committed no crime. They drew attention to the 11 lunatics in Castle Rushen on July 1st 1858, and reminded them that one inmate had been committed there as insane on 22 April 1858, only to commit suicide on May 26th and asked for immediate steps to be taken to improve the situation¹⁶. Pressure also came from London.

In response, Tynwald passed an act in 1860 to build a new 'Lunatic Asylum' having already obtained, it said, a promise by the British government to pay half the cost. But there was a disagreement about which costs were covered and London delayed the matter, stating that it had to be referred back to Parliament – which took some years to achieve. Further complaints followed. On 3 October 1861 Dr John Henry Wilson, a physician from Liverpool, set out his concerns to the Office of the Commission in Lunacy, which was responsible for asylums in the UK. He stated that

There can be no doubt that many of whom nothing is heard are kept in close confinement by their friends for fear of being sent to Castle Rushen to be associated with felons... The Governor of the Castle informed me that within a few miles of Castletown a lunatic was confined in a room with simply straw, his food being given to him through a window.¹⁷

Britain wanted Tynwald to agree to build a temporary asylum until a permanent one could be erected. On 13 April 1862 Tynwald refused to provide the money to do so¹⁸.

Press coverage

Then in the autumn of 1862 the conditions suffered by mentally ill people who were not criminally insane was reported in the press, echoing the report of Dr. Wilson. It was not a letter to *The Times* by Wilkie Collins – who had not yet visited the Isle of Man – but a piece in *The Liverpool Mercury*¹⁹ which itself was reprinted from the local the Isle of Man paper *The Mona's Herald* where it had appeared two days earlier²⁰. It concerned a woman who was being held at her own home in conditions of confinement and abuse. It made harrowing reading. The woman had been seduced and had her fortune stolen. This con-man was then himself killed in a mining accident. The woman went mad. Her brother

chained up his sister in a dark and filthy stable, half starving or feeding her with offal which swine would loathe; whilst her shivering limbs were but half-covered with filthy rags, and the rottenness and filth in which she was buried made her an object of disgust and loathing... Here covered with these rags and vermin, and wallowing in this filth, the miserable female has clanked her chains for more than 20 years!

The vicar, a local magistrate and the captain of the parish did nothing. Then

An English philanthropist who was recently over here, accidentally hearing of this wretched case, visited the poor maniac... He found the case a more deplorable one than had been represented to him.

The identity of this ‘English philanthropist’ is not known. But the piece reached London officials who passed it on to the Lieutenant Governor, then Francis Pigott. He called for an immediate enquiry. The result may not have been what he expected. He wrote back to London

I regret to have to report that so much of the statement in the newspaper as relates to the manner in which the Lunatic had been treated is in the main correct²¹

After some efforts the release of the young woman was secured with the help of the assistant attorney general. His identity is not known. The Attorney General from 1844 to 1866 was Charles Richard Ogden and in 1863 Alfred Walter Adams of Atholl street was listed as acting attorney-general for the isle²².

Pigott died unexpectedly in January 1863. The new Governor, Henry Brougham Loch, took office on 19 February but the wrangling about money went on. There were problems finding a site for the new lunatic asylum. Finally, Strang Farm near Douglas was identified but there followed delays while the land was surveyed and valued.

In England meanwhile there was correspondence during 1862 and 1863 in *The Times* about the way that lunatics were treated – not in the Isle of Man but in remote parts of Britain²³. In December, Sydney Hodges, Secretary of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, wrote from Torquay about several cases and had some success in rescuing people confined in appalling conditions in lofts and barns simply because of their mental condition²⁴. On 8 February 1864 a further letter of his was published in *The Times* about “a case in the Isle of Man, which, from the description sent, seemed almost as dreadful as those already exposed”²⁵. The information had been given to him by William F. Peacock, a Manchester writer. He had visited Man in the spring of 1863 to write a tourist guide²⁶. On the day Hodges’s letter appeared, he wrote his own account of what he had found to *The Times*. He explained that in July 1863, after rambling “over every part of the island and thrice round it” he came across the story of Dick Waterson. Peacock tracked him down to a village called Ballakilowey and found a man of 34 who for 17 years had been

bricked up, alive and alone. The walls of his filthy cow-house are damp and unsightly; a morsel of foul straw varies the squalid monotony of the cold clay floor; and Dick Waterson is naked save a loose sack which now and then he throws on his shivering shoulders. I forbear to speak of the ordure of the place, of the countless vermin which inhabit his (otherwise fair and soft) skin, and of other even more disgusting matters.²⁷

In October 1863 Peacock brought the case to the attention of the Lieutenant Governor who wrote back to him “most feelingly” though Waterson was still in his cow shed in January 1864²⁸.

Asylum built

Further reports from the prison chaplain and doctor at Castle Rushen were made in December 1863 and January 1864 describing in some detail the disgusting conditions which mentally ill inmates lived in and the cruel way the other prisoners treated them. Extra turnkeys and an extension to the jail to enable the criminally insane to be housed in separate accommodation were agreed in February²⁹ and shortly after

Parliament finally agreed to the purchase of 35 Acres of Strang Farm at a cost of £2016, half to be paid by Tynwald, half by Britain. The vendor was possibly George Millet, the only farmer in Strang in an 1863 directory³⁰. The total cost to the UK parliament was estimated at £4000 to £5000.³¹ Further arguments about cost followed. In 1867 Mr J T Hingston who had gained experience at Northampton and North Riding asylums was appointed as the Resident Medical Superintendent³². The new Ballamona Asylum, designed by Joseph Henry Christian was finally opened on 2 June 1868 at a total cost of £15,149 split equally between London and Tynwald³³ – 78 patients were admitted. The building was demolished in 1998.

Conclusion

Wilkie's knowledge of the way that people were treated could have come from two sources. He may have met William Peacock, though it seems more likely than not that Peacock had left before Collins arrived. Or he could simply have heard the same tales as Peacock did. Ballakilowey, where Dick Waterson was incarcerated, is about four miles from Castletown where Peacock first heard the story of 'Mad Dick'. Collins also stayed in Castletown and made his excursion to the Calf of Man from there³⁴. The treatment of mentally ill people on the Isle of Man was no secret there. Caine himself writes about it in his autobiography³⁵. And In 1870, after Ballamona was opened, a local poet and vicar, J E Pattison, wrote

The Tom o' Bedlams of our Mona's isle;
The Peter Greys, and Bettys of the Drun,
Were everywhere — outraging decency,
In rags that made the nakedness more sad
Than Indian Fakeer of the Himalaya hills.³⁶

What is certain though is that Wilkie Collins wrote no letter to *The Times* and played no part in hurrying up the long-awaited asylum for mentally ill people on the Isle of Man.

Acknowledgment

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¹ For example *Armada* edited John Sutherland, Penguin 1995, p129

² Nuel Pharr Davis *The Life of Wilkie Collins* 1956 p.242

³ Hall Caine *My Story* Heinemann, London 1908 p19

⁴ Cited in Vivien Allen *Hall Caine* 1997 p305. The letter was from Caine to Samuel Norris, March 1905

⁵ Vivien Allen *Hall Caine* 1997 see p187. Caine did not move to Man until 1893.

⁶ To Charles Ward 19 July 1859, *Letters of Wilkie Collins* p167. See also To Harriet Collins 14 July 1859, *Letters* p166

⁷ To Harriet Collins 2 July 1863, *Letters* p228

⁸ To Harriet Collins 4 August 1863, *Letters* p229

⁹ To Charles Ward 29 August 1863, *Letters* p230

¹⁰ To Harriet Collins 1 September 1863, *Letters* p231-232

¹¹ *Armada* 1866 Book the First, Chapter IV 'The Shadow of the Past'

¹² David Robertson *A Tour Through the Isle of Man* London 1794

¹³ John Belchen ed. *A New History of the Isle of Man* vol 5 Liverpool University Press 2000, p67

¹⁴ Manx National Heritage (MNH) Government Letter Book vol X p79

¹⁵ www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/sx1925/mb.htm

¹⁶ MNH Government Letter Book vol X p95

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- ¹⁷ MNH Government Letter Book vol IX p338-341: Copy of Dr Wilson's report attached to a letter from W C Spring Rice, secretary to the Office of Commission in Lunacy to Francis Piggot, Lieutenant Governor, Isle of Man dated 11 November 1861.
- ¹⁸ MNH Government Letter Book vol IX p468
- ¹⁹ *The Liverpool Mercury* Friday 19 September 1862 p6
- ²⁰ *The Mona's Herald* Wednesday 17 September 1862
- ²¹ MNH Government Letter Book vol IX p481-484 13 October 1862
- ²² William Thwaites *Isle of Man - its Civil and Ecclesiastical History* Sheffield 1863, entry for Douglas
- ²³ See also Richard Altick *The Presence of the Present* Columbus 1991 p.545 et.seq.
- ²⁴ *The Times* 10 December 1863 p9 'A Horrible Story' and 15 December 1863 p9 'Another Horrible Story'.
- ²⁵ *The Times* 8 February 1864 p9
- ²⁶ William F Peacock *Everybody's New Guide...to the Isle of Man* Manchester [1863]
- ²⁷ *The Times* 11 February p6
- ²⁸ *The Times* 8 February 1864 p9
- ²⁹ MNH Government Letter Book vol X 6 February 1864
- ³⁰ William Thwaites *Isle of Man- its Civil and Ecclesiastical History* Sheffield 1863, entry for Parish of Braddan
- ³¹ MNH Government Letter Book vol X 26 January 1864 and 7 March 1864
- ³² Twenty Second Report of the Commissioners in Lunacy to the Lord Chancellor, 1867 p7
- ³³ John Belchen ed. *A New History of the Isle of Man* vol 5 Liverpool University Press 2000, p102 and *Ballamona Hospital 1868/1968 Souvenir Programme 1968* see www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/gazateer/bmona.htm
- ³⁴ See for example the detailed descriptions of the town in *Armada! Book the First*, Chapter 3 'Day and Night'. It was probably the place where he 'got rooms at last' in his letter To Harriet Collins 1 September 1863, *Letters* p231-232
- ³⁵ Hall Caine *My Story* London 1908 pp16-19
- ³⁶ Rev. James E Pattison c.1812-c1880 *Manxiana* Ramsey 1870