

THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

PATRONS Faith Clarke, Baroness James of Holland Park (P. D. James)

Chairman Andrew Gasson, 3 Merton House, 36 Belsize Park, London, NW3 4EA

Membership Paul Lewis, 4 Ernest Gardens, Chiswick, London W4 3QU

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2003

A WILKIE COLLINS CONFERENCE – MARCH 2004

A conference under the general title of ‘Wilkie Collins and the Art of Crime’ is being arranged in conjunction with the University of London Institute of English Studies (IES) School of Advanced Study. It will be an all day meeting on Saturday 6 March 2004 with a probable cost of £15 for members of the WCS and concessions, and £25 for non-members. The list of speakers is still being confirmed and we hope to give full details for booking with the December Newsletter.

A STUDY COURSE ON DICKENS

The Charles Dickens Museum (previously Dickens House Museum) is running an exciting course entitled ‘The World of Charles Dickens’. The series of eight lectures will take place in the unique setting of Dickens’s own house, 48 Doughty Street, where he lived between 1837 and 1839 and wrote *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The topics covered include ‘Dickens’s Theatre’ (Tony Williams); ‘Dickens’s Illustrators (Anthony Burton); ‘Dickens Abroad’ (Leon Litvack); Dickens and Publishers’ (Elizabeth James); ‘Dickensian London’ (Andrew Sanders); ‘The Public Readings’ (Malcolm Andrews); and ‘Dickens and Christmas’ (Michael Slater). The course includes access to the research facilities at the Charles Dickens Museum with access to rare artefacts from the collection.

The course fee is £100 (£80 concessions) for the entire course which runs on Tuesday evenings from 21 October – 9 December 2003. For further information or bookings contact info@dickensmuseum.com or 020 7405 2127.

COLLINS AND THE RELAUNCHED *HOUSEHOLD WORDS*

The ever-alert Richard Beaton has discovered a 'new' piece by the Manx novelist, Hall Caine, referring to Wilkie. In 1902 it was intended to relaunch a new series of *Household Words* and Caine narrates the following story:

'Calling on Wilkie Collins in the last days of his life, I found my friend greatly excited by the prospect of publishing his next novel as a serial in one of the very humblest of cheap periodicals. A great illustrated weekly had offered a better price, but that counted for nothing. "Think of it--three hundred thousand readers!" I argued that they were not his readers, but the readers of Jack Sheppard, and of all the wildest balderdash that could be put together. "All the better" said Collins. "They'll be easier to handle if I give them something worth having." I argued that, apparently, they did not want good work, since they were always revelling in bad. "Nonsense," said my friend, "they take the best they can get, and it is our fault if they can't get any better." "But think of it," I protested, "you are giving up the best readers in the country for this unknown penny public. "That's the worst of it," said Wilkie. "It is such a pity it can't be a ha'penny one."

Some of this sounds similar to Collins's views expressed in his 1858 essay, 'The Unknown Public', for the original *Household Words* run by Charles Dickens (21 August 1858). Here he discovered for the first time the penny novel-journalists and an estimated 'monster audience of at least three million!' and considered that 'the future of English fiction may rest with the Unknown Public which is waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad.'

Caine's 1908 autobiography, *My Story*, repeats several recollections of Collins previously published in *The Globe* of 4 October 1889. These anecdotes are not necessarily reliable and Caine was criticized by a correspondent of *The World* (16 October 1889) for inaccurate reports in a number of provincial journals.

DID WILKIE PLAY THE CONCERTINA?

The Wheatstone English concertina was extremely popular in mid-Victorian times. It was developed by Sir Charles Wheatstone (the noted physicist responsible for the Wheatstone Bridge) and became familiar at both concert performances and upper-class musical soirees. There was music specially written for the concertina and its two great virtuosos were Giulio Regondi and Richard Blagrove.

On page four of *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* by Allan Atlas (OUP 1996), its author, an American Professor of Music, suggests “ ... the identity of two other mid-century concertinists is worth a moment’s (possibly wild) speculation. The Wheatstone ledgers record the sale of a concertina on 18 May 1860 to a Mr Collins, while an entry of 18 February 1861 records another to a Mr Dickens. Now, while the name Collins is commonplace and Dickens is not rare, we may at least ask if Messrs Collins and Dickens could be the writers Wilkie and Charles.” The Wheatstone ledgers are now in South London’s Horniman Museum. These also reveal two further sales to a Mr Collins on 11 January 1861, one at 3 guineas and one at 6 guineas at about the time as the young Carrie Graves was staying with Wilkie in Harley Street. Perhaps one or all of these concertinas was a present.

But as Atlas points out, Dickens was known to be ‘an avid accordionist’ and Wilkie was certainly familiar with the concertina. The instrument features in both *The Woman in White* and *Armada*. Count Fosco is an accomplished concertina player singing when ‘sitting in the full blaze of the hot June afternoon ... Figaro’s famous song in the Barber of Seville ... accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms...’

In *Armada*, the musician is Pedgift Junior who owns a very elegant concertina, inlaid with his initials in mother-of-pearl, which he uses to entertain Miss Milroy on the picnic boat. “‘The Death of Marmion,’ ‘The Battle of the Baltic,’ ‘The Bay of Biscay,’ ‘Nelson,’ ... these were the songs in which the roaring concertina and strident tenor of Gustus Junior exulted.’ He concludes with ‘The Mistletoe Bough’ and ‘Poor Mary Anne’ and finally pleases the deaf Mrs Pentecost with her ear trumpet with a sacred melody.

Readers interested in this topic should also refer to the essay ‘Collins, Count Fosco, and the Concertina’ by Allan Atlas in the *WCS Journal*, NS II 1999 pp. 56-60. There seems to be no mention of the instrument in the letters of either Collins or Dickens but did Wilkie play the concertina?

REALITY’S DARK LIGHT

A new book on Collins called *Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins* is due out in September. It is Volume 41 in the University of Tennessee’s *Studies in Literature* and is edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. The illustrated book will retail in the United States at \$40 (ISBN: 1572332743).

The following is an extracts from the blurb: ‘In the midst of a Victorian culture ingrained with strict social etiquette and societal norms, Wilkie Collins

composed novels that contained asocial, even anarchic, impulses. Seen as a radical, especially in his later writing, Collins purposefully took on the sensitive issues of marriage laws, vivisection, and socialism. He openly criticized Victorian social conventions, and he clearly questioned England's imperial privilege. During a time when women were socially marginalized, Collins's novels are replete with strong, independent, even illegitimate and vengeful heroines. Collins creates a world more Kafkaesque than Dickensian, a world populated by doppelgangers, secret selves, oddballs, and grotesques. The essays of *Reality's Dark Light* purposefully work to expand Collins's legacy beyond *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*; they move well past the simplistic view of Collins's works as 'sensation novels', 'detective novels', or even 'popular fiction', all labels that carry with them pejorative connotations. Throughout his career, Collins continued steadfastly to espouse his artistic vision of realism, but it was a vision that bore the burden of critical scorn because his fiction so often focused on darker truths that offended middle-class Victorian society.'

The contents include Tamar Heller on 'Masterpiece Theatre and Ezra Jennings's Hair: Some Reflections on Where We've Come, and Where We're Going, in Collins Studies'; Martha Stoddard-Holmes on 'Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark: Wilkie Collins and Disabled Women's Sexuality'; Graham Law on 'Yesterday's Sensations: The Challenge of Collins's Late Works'; and other contributions by Lillian Nayder, Jenny Taylor and the editors.

BLIND LOVE

The Broadview Press edition of *Blind Love* – also edited by Bachman and Cox – is due out on 1 November 2003 (ISBN 155111447X). Broadview editions have established themselves as the definitive critical editions for Collins's works and apart from meticulous attention to the text include invaluable background material. For further details from Don Cox see the WCS Spring 2003 Newsletter.

WILKIE COLLINS – MAN OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION

A new book by Wilkie Collins Society member Dr Alexander Grinstein offers a Freudian analysis of Wilkie's life seen through his work. Grinstein is a Professor of Psychiatry and President of the Sigmund Freud archives in New York. So naturally his approach is from a psychoanalytic point of view. If you believe in Freud you will find this book interesting and insightful. But even uncritical readers will baulk at the typos and minor errors and may also wonder if every single one of Wilkie's books and stories really was part of a process of working out the relationship with his father, mother, brother, lovers and even

his own body – and if those relationships were really as troubled as Freud, or at least Grinstein, would have us believe. But the book is an interesting and unusual addition to Collins studies and congratulations to Grinstein for the immense amount of work that has gone into it. *Wilkie Collins – Man of Mystery and Imagination* International Universities Press, Madison, 2003 (ISBN 0823666816).

VICTORIAN SENSATION

Recently published is Michael Diamond's *Victorian Sensation or the Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Anthem Press, ISBN 1 84331 076 7, hardback, £25). Diamond draws on a wealth of primary material to "explore the stories that impacted on Victorian Society through the eyes of the contemporary media ... shedding light on the Victorian appetite for gruesome and explicit reportage on murders and sex scandals."

Much of the material is drawn from contemporary newspaper accounts with chapters covering royalty, politicians, religion and morality, sex scandals and murder, the 'sensation' novel and the 'sensation' drama. There is a useful chronology and nearly 40 illustrations. Two of these relate specifically to Collins, showing the theatre programme for the 1877 production of *The Moonstone* and 'The Woman in White Waltz'. The 'sensation' novel and the 'sensation' drama are discussed in relation to Collins, Mary Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood and Charles Reade. Thus there are several references to Wilkie and his works as well as to his source material such as the Constance Kent and Madeleine Smith cases.

INVENTING THE VICTORIANS

Like most good books, Matthew Sweet's *Inventing the Victorians*, which covers similar ground, has now been remaindered. Originally published in 2001 at £16.99, it is available for £5 from Foley Books Ltd, 64 Nottingham Road, Bingham, Nottinghamshire NG13 8AW (01949 831112).

A VICTORIAN BOOKER PRIZE

A new series of *Before the Booker* will be broadcast on the digital BBC FOUR channel in the autumn during the six weeks leading up to the 2003 Booker Prize award. The series takes four books published in one year and a panel of enthusiasts and experts decides which would then have won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Second in the series is 1860 comparing *The Woman in White*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *First*

Love, a novella by Ivan Turgenev. Despite a strong defence by eminent QC Michael Mansfield, Wilkie fans should be prepared to weep at the treatment of his book which clearly would have won in 1860 and which the panel unanimously agreed created a genre of escapist fiction. Nevertheless the standard of debate, chaired by Clive Anderson, was extremely high even if the winner was no surprise.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO WILKIE COLLINS?

The *Sunday Times Magazine* of 11 May (page 14) gave a very brief biography of Collins in its series 'Whatever Happened to'. He was given due credit for inventing the detective novel and the short piece was accompanied by the Lock and Whitfield photograph for the fifth series of *Men of Mark* in 1881.

THE BIG READ

The BBC's 'The Big Read' also comes to a climax later this year. *The Woman in White* is the only Collins book on the list of the nation's 100 favourite novels. Whether it will make it any further to the final stages remains to be seen. There is more information at www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread, although not very much about Wilkie!

Our own attempt at a 'Big Read' – asking members to nominate their favourite Collins book – has had a small response. So we are extending it to Christmas. Please let Andrew (apogee@apgee.co.uk) or Paul (paul@paullewis.co.uk) know your favourite Wilkie novel – and why. You can do this either by email or post.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE – THE MUSICAL

Reports in industry newspapers say that Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical loosely based on *The Woman in White* received its first airing in July at the composer's home in Sydmonton. Producers from the USA and the UK were given a workshop presentation of Act I and one or two songs from Act II. The lyrics are by Charlotte Jones and David Zippel; Trevor Nunn is down to direct and musical director Simon Lee conducted a six piece orchestra. There is no news yet on commercial production.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF COLLINS

The 1861 one volume edition of *The Woman in White* contained what is thought to be the first photographic image of an author pasted in to a book. We know that Wilkie sat for several versions of the photograph, taken by Cundall Downes of New Bond Street. But new analysis now indicates that there were numerous minor – and some major – variants of the picture – see examples at Paul Lewis' web site www.wilkiecollins.com. If any members have a copy of this edition and are willing to share information about the image, could they contact membership secretary Paul Lewis paul@paullewis.co.uk or by letter to the address on the front of this newsletter.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE – A NEW E-TEXT

The indefatigable James Rusk, who has converted almost all of Wilkie's fiction into e-text format, is now embarking on other material. Some essays from *My Miscellanies* (1863) are already on his site and he has recently obtained permission to convert Wilkie's 1871 dramatic version of *The Woman in White*.

This is a very welcome addition to the availability of Collins's works since there were probably no more than about 25 fragile copies of the original text. It was privately printed by Collins, himself, for the stage production at the Olympic Theatre. The first night took place on 9 October 1871 and the play ran with great success until February 1872. The text is now available at www.blackmask.com/jrusk/wcollins/main.html. There are also some illustrations from *The Woman in White* on Andrew Gasson's revised web site at www.wilkie-collins.info.

WYBERT REEVE

Actor and friend of Collins, Wybert Reeve (1831-1906), played the part of Walter Hartright in the Olympic production of *The Woman in White* although he later took over the role of Fosco and took the production on tour around England for over a year. Reeve published several anecdotes about Wilkie in 'Recollections of Wilkie Collins' in *Chambers's Journal* for June 1906. It has recently been discovered during a trip to Australia, where Reeve spent many of his later years, that this article originally appeared in Reeve's 1891 memoirs, *From Life*, published by George Robertson of Melbourne. The book also contains a black and white portrait of Reeve. Robertson had earlier published at least two of Collins's titles and for a time was located very appropriately in Little Collins Street.

LETTERS

Work on the new, comprehensive edition of Wilkie Collins's letters is entering its final stages. The editorial team has now identified more than 2800 letters, over 650 of which had not been recorded previously. The list of letters which can be included will have to close in the next few weeks. So if any member has any information about letters that they wish to share please contact Paul or Andrew as soon as possible. *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* will be published by Pickering & Chatto in four volumes in Spring 2005 – price £350. www.pickeringchatto.com/wilkiecollins.htm

NEWSLETTER SPONSOR- RICHARD BEATON

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The easiest way to contact us, either with queries or with information for future Newsletters, is now by email:

Andrew Gasson
Paul Lewis

apogee@apgee.co.uk
paul@paullewis.co.uk

www.wilkiecollins.info
www.wilkiecollins.com

