



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2004

P. D. JAMES AT THE THACKERAY SOCIETY

Members are reminded of the announcement in the last Newsletter of our joint-meeting with the Thackeray Society on Thursday 27 May 2004 at the Reform Club in London's Pall Mall. Our Patron, the distinguished author P. D. James, will be speaking on 'Wilkie Collins's Contribution to the Detective Novel'.

The evening will commence at 7.00 pm for 7.30 pm with the Thackeray Society's traditional formal dinner-black tie for gentlemen – followed by P. D. James' talk. All members of the WCS are welcome and may bring one guest. The cost of the evening is £45 including wine with dinner. A bookings form from the Reform Club is enclosed and should be returned with your remittance on direct to The Secretary of the Thackeray Society, Reform Club, 104 Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5EW.

THE WILKIE COLLINS MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Enclosed with this Newsletter is a piece on The Wilkie Collins Memorial Library which was set up by the journalist Harry Quilter in the early 1890s after permission had been refused for a memorial in St Paul's. Andrew Gasson has been investigating the library's fate in the archives of both the People's Palace in London's Mile End and Stepney Borough Council's Libraries Committee. Much interesting information has come to light but the eventual demise of the Memorial Library remains a 'Dead Secret.'

THE WOMAN IN WHITE – THE MUSICAL

Excitement mounts in theatrical circles over the musical adaptation of *The Woman in White* due to be staged by Andrew Lloyd-Webber at the Palace Theatre in London's Charing Cross Road. Lloyd Webber owns the theatre and there was trouble earlier this year with the cast of *Les Miserables* which is being forced to transfer after a 19 year run at the Palace to the more compact Queen's Theatre with a smaller orchestra pit.

The musical, said to have a £5 million budget, will star Michael Crawford as Fosco and Maria Friedman as Marian Halcombe. Michael Crawford, 62, first hit the musical stage in his *Phantom of the Opera* and was persuaded not to sail the Atlantic single handed in order to take the role of Fosco, his first on the west end stage since *Phantom*. Maria Friedman has won three Olivier Awards, most recently for her role in the musical *Ragtime*.

The script contains an attempted seduction of Marian by Fosco. That was the idea of Charlotte Jones, who is adapting the play for Lloyd Webber. She suggested it at their first meeting and now confesses that the pair are taking 'every liberty' with the story in order to squeeze 600 pages into two and a half hours and make it fit the musical format and the needs of a modern audience.

She also says that Lloyd Webber, whose collection of pre-Raphaelite paintings was recently exhibited at the Royal Academy, is a natural Victorian. You can get a flavour – including some music – at <https://www.andrewlloydwebber.com/shows/the-woman-in-white>

The casting, the money, the writer, the director (Trevor Nunn), and the location mean that *The Woman in White* has international interest. It has been previewed in newspapers in New York and early tickets are already appearing on eBay for inflated prices. It opens for previews on 28 August 2004 and tickets – ranging in price from £15 to £50 can be booked direct on line at www.thisistheatre.com/londonshows/womaninwhite.html or on 0870 895 5579.

This month's *Theatregoer Magazine*, given out free of charge with west end theatre programmes, includes an article about Charlotte Jones and her adaptation. "It helps," according to Jones, "that this one [*The Woman in White*] is flawed. In some ways, this is a bit of a potboiler, so we could be freer with it. Some novels -- Madame Bovary, for instance -- are so revered that people feel very proprietorial and they don't like changes. It's not like that with *The Woman in White*. There'll be purists, but lots of people have said it's their favourite novel and then can't remember a word of it." The author of the article is Georgina Brown of *The Mail on Sunday*.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE –IN INDIA

According to *The Daily Mirror* of 14 January *The Woman in White* is also being turned into a television series in India with the title *Dhawa/a Kanya*. Sangeetha (Laura) from Sudulanda Walawwa in Kapdy marries Sriyantha (Percy) and after the honeymoon the couple come to live in Sriyanthantha's palatial mansion. Here they are joined by his closest friend W. Jayasiri (Fosco) and Sangeetha's sister Jayani (Marian).....

The script is by Professor Nimal Senanayake who is co-producer with Sunil Wickrama. The shooting location is in Galle, Sri Lanka, but for the story it is near Kaludiyawewa which translates as Blackwater Lake. Senanayake is reported as saying that he was so impressed with Wilkie Collins's novel that he thought the unusual plot had the ideal ingredients to make a hit, if it was adapted carefully. He took up the challenge of scripting and spread the story to run for 29 episodes. Further details from <http://www.dailymirror.lk/2004/01/14/feat.asp>.

Wilkie would have almost certainly been very pleased at such an adaptation (probably more than with a musical version) since on 29 December 1883 he wrote to his friend Sebastian Schlesinger: "By-the-bye, I have gained my little distinction, since you last heard of me. My novels are so popular among the native races of India (who can read English) that they are to be translated into the Bengali language for the native inhabitants who want to read me. The Series is to begin with "The Woman in White." There seems to be some promise, in this, of the stories being still alive when the story-teller is dead." Well, how right he was.

THE VAN DE POEL SALE AT CHRISTIE'S

Auction sales often bring out interesting and unique items which have been hidden away for many years. The stunning Van de Poel sale by Christie's on 2 March featured Wilkie's personal copies of the play versions of *No Name* and *The Woman in White*. *No Name* was never actually produced in England although there were two different adaptations. The first was written by W. B. Bernard, shortly after the publication of the book in 1863, whilst the second adaptation was made by Wilkie himself in 1870. This was the copy sold at Christie's as Lot 163. The following item, Lot 164, was Wilkie's own copy of *The Woman in White* play, published in 1871. This was particularly interesting as the author had made numerous alterations to the printed text and had virtually rewritten the last two pages. The actual play was a great success running from 9 October 1871 to 24 February 1872. The auction was also a great success with *The Woman in White* selling for £13,000 plus buyers premium.

THE ARTS CLUB

Members may be interested to follow in Wilkie's footsteps and join The Arts Club which was founded in 1863 for those connected either professionally or as amateurs in the Arts, Literature or Science. In 1896 the Club acquired the freehold of the fine 18th century town house in Dover Street. In the course of its life, the Arts Club has included amongst the various categories of membership many of the most outstanding figures in the history of art, literature and science.

Collins became a member in the 1860s, the decade during which literature was a dominant element of the club's activities. There he might have met Charles Dickens, Charles Reade, Edmund Yates Algernon Swinburne as well as Rossetti, Whistler, Carlo Pellegrini (the *Vanity Fair* caricaturist 'Ape') and Richard Monckton Milnes. A full history of the club was written in 1989 by Bernard Denvir under the title of *A Most Agreeable Society*.

Further details of the Club and its membership are available by telephone from the Membership Secretary on 020 7408 5093 – or look on their website at <https://www.theartsclub.co.uk/>

A COLLINS CONCORDANCE

Since the death of the man behind www.concordance.com there has been no online concordance to Wilkie's works. The gap has been filled by Japanese Victorian literature scholar Mitsuohara Mutsuoka. His Hyper-Concordance contains a searchable database of the works of dozens of authors, including Collins. It enables any word or phrase to be found quickly and in context. At the moment, except for Dickens, searches have to be made on individual works rather than the author's whole *corpus*. Try it at <http://victorian-studies.net/concordance/>

MARY BRADDON

Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) was a prolific sensation novelist as well as the founding editor of *Belgravia: A London Magazine* in 1866. She was strongly influenced by Wilkie, amongst others, and in 1887 acknowledged that she owed her best known novel, *Lady Audley 's Secret*, to *The Woman in White* and that “Wilkie Collins is assuredly my literary father.” In *Rough Justice* (I 898), Detective Faunce’s novel reading includes Dickens, Balzac, Gaboriau, Scott and, of course, Wilkie Collins. WCS member, Paul Graham, sends us the following report:

‘As part of the celebration of the life of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, one of the London Borough of Richmond’s illustrious former residents, the Orange Tree Theatre was the venue for two performances of *Secrets and Rumours: The Unconventional Life of M.E. Braddon*. Written by two current Richmond residents, Doug Pinchin and Richard Morris, and based upon Jennifer Carnell’s biography of the novelist, the scene was Braddon’s study in her home, Lichfield House, Richmond, in 1895. A dinner party has just ended, the fashionable guests, including the doomed Oscar Wilde, have just departed, and Braddon (Sabina Franklyn) is left to ruminate upon the scandal that threatened to engulf her. She recalls her precarious days as an actress, her early attempts at authorship under the protection of a deformed publisher in Beverley, East Yorkshire, and her fateful meeting with the handsome publisher, John Maxwell. In a history that would not be out of place in one of her novels, Braddon and Maxwell fell in love but could not marry because Maxwell was already married to a madwoman. When the fact of their unmarried state was revealed, the foundations of their lives were shaken but the storm was ridden out and marriage and respectability eventually followed.’

Although not quite a one-woman show, Sabina Franklyn was assisted by fleeting appearances by four other actors: the success of the play stood or fell upon her performance. Fortunately she was more than capable of carrying the burden. The evening illustrated the massive odds against which Braddon triumphed; fearsome reviews of her acting, George Eliot’s withering criticism of her writing, and the public revelation of her scandalous domestic arrangements following the death of the real Mrs Maxwell which, when reported, led anxious friends to call upon her, as they had assumed she was already Mrs Maxwell.’

Huge credit goes to the theatre for commissioning the play for just two performances and staging it so well in an authentic-looking set. The performance I saw was sold out, and the appreciative audience included a direct descendant of that bold union of Maxwell and Braddon.’

There is also a Study Day from 10.00 am to 5.00 pm on 30 March at the Museum of Richmond. The day features a guided tour around Braddon’s Richmond in the

morning and, in the afternoon, talks from Jennifer Carnell, Gabrielle Malcolm, Matthew Sweet and Kate Mattacks. £15 (£ I O concessions). Information from the Museum of Richmond, Old Town Hall, Whittaker Avenue, Richmond, TW9 1TP.

CHARLES COLLINS IN EXHIBITION

A marvellous collection of landscape paintings by pre-Raphaelite artists is on show at London's Tate Britain gallery. Among 150 works, many from private collections and others seldom seen in public, is Wilkie's brother Charles Allston Collins's *May in the Regent's Park*. Painted in 1851, it is a view from 17 Hanover Terrace where Wilkie and Charles lived with their mother Harriet from 1850 to 1856. The building still stands and the view, from an upstairs window, can still be seen. It looks eastward over what is now the boating lake in Regent's Park. Described by a guide to the exhibition as 'a good painting but not a great painting' it is painted in bands with a narrow sky, trees, lake, park- with sheep- road and finally the garden in front of Hanover Terrace. It still looks remarkably as it did more than 150 years ago. Painted in brilliant colours with what Alison Smith says in the catalogue is 'the detached gaze associated with modern urban landscape'. The picture has been hidden in the Tate storeroom for some years and this may be a rare opportunity to see it. The exhibition, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, is on until 3 May before moving to Berlin (12 June to 19 September) and then Madrid (6 October 2004 to 9 January 2005).

THE FRIENDS OF KENSAL GREEN CEMETERY

The latest issue of the Friends' Magazine gives advance notice of this year's open day which will take place on Saturday 4 July. The programme of events will include tours of the cemetery and catacombs as well as the opportunity to see Wilkie's and Caroline's last resting place which is situated close to the central chapel – Grave 31754/square 141/row 1.

The magazine also contains an article by Sam Bull on William Powell Frith, R.A. (1819-1909). The well-known artist, famous for his paintings of *Derby Day* and *Ramsgate Sands*, was a long-standing friend of Wilkie and a fellow student with Charles Collins. Frith participated in their amateur theatricals and was also a regular guest of Dickens. Various anecdotes about Wilkie are to be found in his *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (1887-1888). Frith is also buried in Kensal Green at square 64/PS.

LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL

The 2004 Ledbury Poetry Festival is to be held between 2 and 11 July. As in previous years, there will also be poetry competition with a closing date of 13 August. For a full programme, contact 0845 4581743 or <https://ledburypoetry.org.uk>.

ARNOLD BENNETT AT STAFFORDSHIRE

Staffordshire University is holding a conference with the theme 'Arnold Bennett: New Perspectives' on Saturday 12 June 2004 in the Regional Film Theatre. The conference is being run in association with the Arnold Bennett Society which celebrates its jubilee and aims to raise the profile of the author and to re-appraise his contributions to literature and journalism. The keynote speaker is Roy Hattersley. Full details are available from Lennie Ashwell, Faculty of Arts, Media and Design, Staffordshire University, College Road, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 2XW, or from l.ashwell@staffs.ac.uk.

GEORGE ELIOT

This year's Guided Tours of George Eliot Country are taking place on 16 May, 16 June, 4 August, and 12 September. They are organised by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council in association with the George Eliot Fellowship who provide the tour guides. Further details from Rose Selwyn on 024 7637 6490 or tourism@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk.

ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

Information about a wide range literary activities is available from very worthwhile Alliance of Literary Societies to which the WCS continues to be affiliated. The website at <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/> lists all of the member groups and gives details of their various forthcoming events plus links to other relevant sites.

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