



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2004

‘A NATIONAL WRONG’

Enclosed with this Newsletter is ‘A National Wrong’. This previously unsigned article by Wilkie Collins and James Payn, the novelist and editor, was originally published in *Chambers’s Journal* on 12 February 1870. It is now republished for the first time with credit going to Graham Law whose research discovered the piece and who has now edited it for the WCS.

P. D. JAMES ON WILKIE COLLINS

“The novel was innovative at the time it was written and it remains the detective story which more than any other successfully reconciles the novel of excitement and action with the novel of social realism and psychological truth... No other single novel has as comprehensively and brilliantly adumbrated all future developments in this resilient and fascinating genre...*The Moonstone*, one of the most perfectly plotted and technically brilliant novels in the English language, moves confidently forward in its variety, its richness and its sustained excitement.”

That description began a talk by the detective novelist P. D. James on ‘Wilkie Collins’s Influence on the Detective Novel’. Speaking at a joint meeting of the WCS and the Thackeray Society at the Reform Club on 27 May, Lady James concluded that it was “lasting and profound.”

Wilkie Collins introduced psychological realism – “what goes on in the mind is much more important than what is picked up on the drawing room floor.” He created the “professional investigator with orthodox skills and personal eccentricity” in Sergeant Cuff. And he followed the “fair play rule in detective

fiction” so that all the clues are there to lead the reader to the answer by logical deduction – of which *The Moonstone* was “the most convincing early example.”

He was also “meticulous in his research” making sure “historical, forensic and medical details were correct.” Lady James said “we have all learned from Wilkie Collins the necessity for conscientious research and the meticulous attention to scientific and physical details” And she went on to criticise Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie and others from the so-called ‘golden age’ of detective fiction for their complete lack of credible murders and accurate detail.

Add to that his use of different narrators his powerful description of the physical environment and the dramatic contrast between the “order, comfort and hierarchy of the Verinder household and the alien and terrifying world outside” and you get “the best of modern detective stories in the English language” which was “undoubtedly an influence... in all main aspects of my crime writing.”

She added “Collins shares with Anthony Trollope the ability to create women who are strong, courageous and independent who we can believe are capable of physical passion.” And concluded “It is because Wilkie Collins’s masterpiece so perfectly combines sensationalism with this essential truth of description, truth of character, and truth as to men and women that it has so profoundly influenced the writing of subsequent detective fiction. And more than a hundred and thirty five years after its first appearance still continues to delight and enthrall us.”

Baroness James of Holland Park is a patron of the WCS and we hope to publish her talk at a later date.

82 WIMPOLE STREET

Wilkie Collins lived at 82 Wimpole Street from early 1888 after leaving his former house at 90 Gloucester Place. Wimpole Street is in central London’s Harley Street area on the Howard de Walden Estate and the archivist, Richard Bowden, has recently unearthed the Estate’s documents on Wilkie’s last home. The house today is unlike its immediate neighbours, having been completely rebuilt during the 1920s. The original appearance can be seen in a photograph illustrating Arthur Compton-Rickett’s article ‘Wilkie Collins’ on pp. 107-122 of *The Bookman* of June 1912.

The earliest document from the archives is dated 15 March 1850 and refers to the existing lease to a Mr Thomas Huddle due to expire on Lady Day 1854. The new lease will be granted to Mr Thomas Burn by His Grace the Duke of Portland for a period of 36 years at an annual rent of £50 for a payment or ‘fine’ of £247.

The next document brings us towards the period of Collins's occupation and is dated 5 October 1886. It represents a new lease for a further 36 years, this time granted by the Trustees of the will of William Henry Cavendish Scott, Fourth Duke of Portland to 'Joseph Walker, Esqre M.D. of 22 Grosvenor Street. W.' for a rent of £80. Walker is 'forthwith to insure the premises' for not less than £1200 and to pay a fine of £500. The document also details extensive works to the house which must include thorough repairs to the roof, windows and basement, relaying the floors and drains; and making good brickwork and the first floor balcony and verandah. Collins is not mentioned by name in the lease but we can assume that the house was in excellent order by the time he moved in as a sub-tenant during February or March 1888. In a letter of 22 December 1887 he had written 'I have taken refuge in the upper floors of &2. Wimpole Street, having the whole place to myself excepting only the dining rooms. I may move next month. I must move in February.' Walker was an eminent dental surgeon and had been editor of the *Monthly Review of Dental Surgery*. He had also been awarded the German War Medal which echoes the opening scenes of *The New Magdalen*. Perhaps he used just one or two of the rooms to practise in Wimpole Street which is why Wilkie had the run of most of the house. In any event Collins remained in occupation until his death in September 1889.

The final document in the archives is dated 26 July 1922 on behalf of The Right Honourable Thomas Evelyn Baron Howard de Walden and Seaford and grants a new lease to A. H. Michell Esq. to commence on 6 April 1926. The rent will be £25 for the first twelve months and £70 thereafter. The document also includes a complete Particulars of Works 'To pull down the whole of the existing buildings on the site', defining precisely the nature of the materials to be used in rebuilding the house, and concludes 'The works are to be completed by 6 April 1927.'

WILKIE COLLINS – SENSATION STORIES

Peter Haining, who edited a collection of Wilkie's stories in 1989, has done it again. *Wilkie Collins – Sensation Stories* brings together ten of Wilkie's best, ranging from his first- 'The Last Stage Coachman' (1843) through the wonderful 'The Diary of Anne Rodway' (1856), the inevitable 'The Dream Woman', this time in its 1859 version, to the much later 'The Clergyman's Confession' (1875) and 'Love's Random Shot' (1883). There is a short introduction which makes some rather dubious claims – including that Wilkie went to Winterton as a child and that he met Martha Rudd there as early as 1860. A number of the illustrations are rather badly reproduced. Nevertheless, it is a useful re-publication of some of his hard to find stories. But don't believe the book when it says some of them have 'never been reprinted.' They all have.

Though until now they were mostly out of print. Peter Haining, editor, *Sensation Stories* Peter Owen, London 2004 (£12.50, ISBN 0-7206-1220-9).

‘A HOUSE TO LET’

One story that is very hard to find is Wilkie’s contribution to the 1858 Christmas Number of *Household Words* called ‘A House to Let’. The whole issue has been reprinted by Hesperus publishing and it contains two chapters written jointly by Dickens and Collins and another- ‘Trotter’s Report’ – just by Collins. There is also a chapter by Elizabeth Gaskell, one by Dickens alone, and a poem by Adelaide Anne Proctor. Charles Dickens, *A House to Let* Hesperus 2004 (£6.99 ISBN 1-84391-085-3).

DEATH BY DICKENS

Wilkie and his brother Charles both appear in the role of detective in two stories in *Death By Dickens* edited by thriller writer Anne Perry. The book contains eleven stories inspired by Dickens’s work. Among them ‘The House of the Red Candle’ by Martin Edwards which features Dickens with Wilkie and ‘The Passing Shadow’ by Peter Tremayne which casts Charles Collins as Dickens’s companion. The first owes more to the pastiches by William Palmer than anything either Dickens or Collins wrote. The second is a much more thoughtful and interesting piece, though lacking in genuine Victorian dialogue or manners. In both, the Collinses are Watson to Dickens’s Holmes, solving mysteries in the seedier back streets of London – and both feature a woman called Bella. The book concludes with Anne Perry’s own ‘A Tale of One City’. Anne Perry, editor, *Death By Dickens* Berkley Prime Crime, New York 2004 (ISBN 0-425-19420-5).

THE MAN IN THE MOONSTONE

The Man in the Moonstone is a book for children by Melanie Johnson. This Dinah Galloway mystery puts the heroine in a musical version of *The Moonstone* which sets the scene for adventure and detection. Melanie Johnson, *The Man in the Moonstone* Orca 2003 (ISBN 1-55143-264-1).

THE HAUNTED HOTEL

A new production of *The Haunted Hotel* will be staged at the Gateway Theatre, Chester, from Monday 8 to Saturday 13 November 2004. It will star well known actor, Brian Blessed. This production is adapted for the stage from Collins’s 1878 novel by Philip Dart and Val May. The story is notable as an early – or possibly the first – example of dental records being used to identify a body – or in this case

a head. There was a previous, excellent adaptation for the Channel Theatre Company of *The Haunted Hotel*, just by Philip Dart, in November 1992. In the current version “Blessed plays a theatrical impresario who summons a company of actors to an empty Victorian theatre in order to enact a ghost story for a private performance. As the extraordinary story unfolds, sudden disappearances and horrifying apparitions lead to a harrowing climax.” Further details from the box office on 01244 340392 or from <http://www.chestergateway.co.uk/viewshowdetail.php?id=38>.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

Michael Crawford fans can hardly contain themselves as the opening night of the musical *The Woman in White* approaches. He stars as Fosco. Music of course is by Andrew Lloyd Webber, with lyrics by David Zippell. We know now that the freely adapted story by Charlotte Jones changes both the secret at the heart of the story and the manner of the death of Glyde. And of course there’s that fatal attraction between Marian, played by Maria Friedman, and Fosco. Preliminary scripts and a couple of early versions of songs have been sold on eBay as have posters for the show and very expensive tickets. An active – and very pro-Michael Crawford – discussion group has started on Yahoo WomanInWhiteTheMusical@yahoo.co.uk. But Lloyd Webber’s company, The Really Useful Group, had to suspend its own internet discussion group after other fans used it to abuse Michael Crawford. All very silly. You can keep up with the official news at www.womaninwhitethemusical.com where there is a full cast list and a weekly production diary.

Other members of the cast include Angela Christian and Jill Paice playing Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, Martin Crewes as Walter Hartright, with Olivier Darley as Glyde and Edward Petherbridge as Mr Fairlie. The production also features a signalman, ‘corn dolly girls’ and others on swings. Wilkie once suggested perking up a production of his play *No Thoroughfare* by introducing a Swiss ballet danced by “twelve nice girls, with short, transparent petticoats”. If only he knew!

The Palace Theatre, which dates from 1891, is being transformed and refurbished inside and should itself be spectacular. The show opens for previews on 28 August and the full production runs from 15 September until 5 March 2005. Tickets are £15 to £50, though cheaper seats have a restricted view. Call 0870 895 5579 or book through the website.

THE PUBLIC FACE OF WILKIE COLLINS

The collected letters of Wilkie Collins is now less than a year from publication with the above title. The total number of letters tracked down by the editors is tantalisingly close to 3,000 and around 2,000 of those have never been published anywhere before. New letters have turned up in Germany, Poland and France as well as many more in the UK and USA. As well as new information about the battle for copyright, Victorian publishing, Wilkie's love of the theatre and sailing, his travels in Europe and the USA, and his many friends, the book will even reveal which days of the week he favoured for letter writing! *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* by William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis will be published in June 2005 by Pickering & Chatto in four volumes, price £350/\$540. More at www.pickeringchatto.com/wilkiecollins.htm

E-TEXTS

James Rusk continues to convert Wilkie's work into electronic form. There are now five of Wilkie's plays on his site, including *The Moonstone* and *Black and White*. More are expected at www.blackmask.com/jrusk/wcollins/main.html. Almost all Wilkie's writing is now available in electronic format. Go to www.wilkiecollins.com and menu option 5 for the complete list. You would do better to print them off the web than pay the prices asked by The Wildside Press for its printed out versions of e-texts, which now includes much of Wilkie's work.

CHARLES COLLINS AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT

One of Charles Collins's paintings has a new home in London. The Victoria & Albert Museum has opened new Painting Galleries to house the founding collections of paintings donated to it by three Victorian patrons, John Sheepshanks, Constantine Jonides, and Chauncy Hare Townshend. 'The Good Harvest' was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1854 and was previously on display in a dimly lit room at the V&A. Its pre-Raphaelite beauty can now be seen much more easily in the well lit galleries crowded with paintings. Sadly no space has been found in the five rooms for a single one of the seven William Collins paintings that the V&A owns which used to be on show in the Henry Cole Wing.

NEW ZEALAND

Concert cellist Steven Isserlis is a longstanding member of the WCS and never misses a chance on his travels to promote Wilkie Collins's work. Interviewed for the *Dominion Post* in Wellington, New Zealand, he revealed he was reading *Man and Wife* 'the only big Wilkie Collins novel he hadn't read' and he

mentioned not only his 'favourite book of all time', *Armada*, but also his membership of the Society.

DUTCH EDITIONS

WCS member Pierre Tissot van Patot is researching editions of Wilkie's work published in the Netherlands. If any members have any pre 1900 Dutch editions themselves or have information about such editions he would like to hear from you at ptissotvanpatot@technip.com

DOUGLAS JERROLD

The latest issue of *Victorian Studies* (Winter 2004, Vol. 46 No 2) features a detailed review of Michael Slater's *Douglas Jerrold: A Life (1803-1857)*. Jerrold was a dramatist, novelist and journalist and is best known for his association with *Punch*. He edited several periodicals including *The Illuminated Magazine* which published Wilkie's first recorded work, 'The Last Stage Coachman', in 1843. Wilkie took over the role of Mr Shadowly Softhead when Jerrold abandoned the 1851 provincial tour of *Not So Bad as We Seem*. He later composed a biographical tribute, 'Douglas Jerrold', in *Household Words* for 5 February 1859 where he wrote that he was "one of the first and dearest friends of my literary life." When Jerrold died suddenly in 1857, *The Frozen Deep* was revived as one of the events to raise funds for his widow. As the reviewer of this new biography puts it, "For the literary and journalistic life of Douglas Jerrold provides, in miniature, a cultural history of popular and radical culture in the first half of the nineteenth century. As such, Michael Slater's study is essential reading for any student of the period."

MARY BRADDON

For those who missed it earlier in the year, there are two more opportunities to see the play *Secrets and Lies* by Doug Pinchin and Richard Morris, previously mentioned in the spring 2004 Newsletter. The play is about the unconventional life of Mary Braddon with the title derived from "the secrets and rumours she had to keep hidden from her adoring public ... which if fully revealed would destroy her reputation as a writer." Mary Braddon acknowledged in 1887 that she owed *Lady Audley's Secret* to *The Woman in White* and that "Wilkie Collins is assuredly my literary father." The production features Sabrina Franklyn and will be staged at Ham House on Sundays 19 and 26 September 2004. Further details available from Ham House, Ham Street, Richmond upon Thames TW10 7RS, 020 8940 1950 or the Ticket Office, 01494 755572.

THE MARGERY ALLINGHAM SOCIETY

Margery Allingham is probably best known for her detective Albert Campion. Chairman Barry Pike has written that over the next few months the Margery Allingham Society is celebrating the centenary of her birth on 20 May 1904: she died in 1966. The anniversary is being marked by a series of events including exhibitions at the Barbican and National Portrait Gallery; a new book, *Margery Allingham: 100 Years of a Great Mystery Writer* published by Lucas Books; talks by Susan Rowland at the Mayfair Library and one by Leslie Forbes at the University Women's Club. There is also a weekend conference in Chelmsford in September.

For information about the Margery Allingham Society, write to Mrs Marianne Van Hoever, 9 Bailey Street, Castle Acre, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE32 2AG (margeryallingham.org.uk)."

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