



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2004

THE WCS JOURNAL

The 2004 number of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, editors Graham Law and Lillian Nayder report, has missed the Christmas deadline at the printers by the proverbial whisker. They would like to apologize to contributors and subscribers alike for the delay and are confident that the latest issue will be available early in the New Year.

Volume 7 will contain four articles covering the length and breadth of Collins's career. Laurence Vielmas gives a detailed reading of two novels from the last decade of the author's life (*Jezebel's Daughter* and *Heart and Science*), unravelling their relations to the new mode of scientific Gothic and its work in the reconstruction of gender roles in the later nineteenth century. Angela Richardson, on the other hand, goes back to the author's early teens and offers a new reading of Harriet Collins's manuscript *Italian Journal* of 1836-37, making the case for the mother to be treated as an author in her own right. In between, Graham Stott and Carolyn Oulton return to two of the major sensation novels of the 1860s (*The Woman in White* and *Armadale*, respectively), focusing in turn on the dynamics of weekly serial publication and the conventions of romantic friendship.

In addition, in the Reviews section, there will be a notice of *Reality's Dark Light*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox, the first collection of scholarly essays on the author to appear since *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront* (1995). This is followed by a review of two specialist studies by Alexis Weedon and Bradley Deane on the Victorian fiction industry with particular reference to the rise of the mass market, both of which give a prominent place to the author of 'The Unknown Public'.

We are sure that the issue will be worth waiting for! It will be the subject of a separate mailing and should be sent out in January.

UNPUBLISHED PLAY

During research for the forthcoming edition of Collins's letters at various county records offices, some unpublished notes by Collins have been discovered. These represent his working ideas for a possible play which in the event was never

completed. It is hoped to send a transcript of these notes with background details and an introduction also in the early part of 2005.

A WILKIE COLLINS CONFERENCE

The University of Sheffield is hosting a one-day conference on Wilkie Collins on Saturday 19 March 2005. There is no theme, but papers on his life and literature have been submitted and there will be a panel on the forthcoming edition of his letters. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Graham Law are confirmed speakers. Further details are available from Andrew Mangham, Department of English Literature, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN or egp02asm@sheffield.ac.uk. The University website is at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/english/events/collins1.html>. Proceedings will be reported in the 2005 *WCS Journal*.

WILKIE COLLINS BREAKS SOME RECORDS

2004 is the year that Wilkie Collins has gone mad – or at least the prices of his books have. Wednesday 3 March saw the renowned *Halsead Vander Poel Collection of English Literature* come under the hammer at Christie's in London. Collins was in highly esteemed company with entire collection containing some of the most significant books of English literature from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Wilkie was represented by three items. Lot 163 consisted of a first edition of *No Name* with a short autograph letter together with a copy of the dramatic version of *No Name* privately published by the author in a small edition during 1870. This sold for about £3,800 including the auction premium. Lot 165, however, was a copy of the more unusual, dramatic version of *The Woman in White* also 'published by the author', in 1871. This was a unique copy since Collins had made alterations to the last two pages of the text but it sold for a little under £16,000 with the auction premium. But do not despair if you missed the sale, since the play is still available from Boston bookseller Peter Stern at the revised price of a mere \$65,000. The third lot, 164, consisted of reviews of *The Woman in White* play published as a 16 page pamphlet in 1871 as *Specimens of Criticism Extracted from Notices of "The Woman in White" in the Press*. A year or two ago another copy was sold by a US bookseller for \$500 but lot 164 sold for nearly £1,700 inclusive. In 1871 it was probably given away free.

A more recent Sotheby's auction on 3 December sold books from 'the Library of Mrs J. Insley Blair' another notable American collector. There were four Collins items. Lot 126 was a first edition of the 1852 *Mr Wray's Cash-Box* which sold for \$960 while lot 129, the 1873 dramatic version of *The New Magdalen*, went for the same inclusive price which was probably fairly reasonable for a rare publication. More exciting was a first edition in original cloth of *The Woman in White* which sold for an astonishing \$30,000 against an estimate of \$6-8,000. But this proved a mere trifle compared with a first of *The Moonstone* in cloth which went for the stratospheric \$125,600 which must be a record for any published Wilkie book.

Prices also seem to be rocketing with both traditional and internet booksellers. An 1861 one volume edition of *The Woman in White*, inscribed by Collins during his visit to Rome in 1864 but rebound in elaborate modern calf, can be had from Houle Rare Books for \$7,500 while the aforementioned Peter Stern could let you have a copy of

After Dark in original cloth for just \$12,500. If collections are more to your taste, the Heritage Bookshop of Los Angeles has for sale 28 Collins titles in 66 volumes – mainly first editions in two or three volumes – uniformly rebound in leather at \$30,000.

In his lifetime, the maximum Wilkie received for writing one of his books was the £5,000 agreed by Smith, Elder for *Armada/e* which was published in 1866. At the time, this was the highest sum ever paid to an author with the exception of Dickens.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE MUSICAL

The first word in the musical version of *The Woman in White* that Collins himself actually wrote is ‘crush’. When Marian Halcombe tells Walter Hartright he must give up his love for Laura Fairlie because she is engaged to Sir Percival Glyde, Collins wrote “‘Crush it!’ she said. ‘Here, where you first saw her, crush it!’”. Lyricist David Zippel had Marian sing “You must crush all feelings for her”. That is the first evidence, 32 minutes into the production, that he had read the book.

The show, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and tightly directed by Trevor Nunn, opens with a scene straight from Dickens’s ghost story *The Signalman* and echoes the 1948 film of *The Woman in White* rather than Collins’s own dramatisation of the book itself. It uses characters that are very different from the originals to move through scenes vaguely related to Collins’s plot. Marian (Maria Friedman) is beautiful and girly; Laura (Jill Paice) is strong; Hartright (Martin Crewes) does little; and Mr Fairlie (Edward Petherbridge) is camp rather than hypochondriac. Strangely it is Sir Percival Glyde who most resembles Collins’s original character – Oliver Darley gives us a sleek and creepy villain. Fosco, conceived by Collins as a contradiction – a fat man who is evil rather than jolly- has his jollity and humour restored by a padded and prostheticised Michael Crawford. The secret is changed – Glyde seduced Anne Catherick and drowned her baby – and his death inevitably comes on the railway track with which the story opens rather than Collins’s more dramatic original in a vestry fire.

The hi-tech set, using projected computer graphics onto a mobile cyclorama mounted on a revolve, with doors that magically arrive at the right place and time for an entry or exit, is as effective as a flight simulator in swooping the audience through the perspective of the many scene changes. Marian’s soaking in a thunderstorm as she overhears Glyde and Fosco plotting is well done, as are the wedding, Laura’s refusal to sign the unread document, and the rescue from the asylum. The sisters’ talk of their powerlessness in the face of men is reminiscent of the book. But these are small islands in a sea of doggerel set to unmemorable tunes sung by over-amplified voices.

The packed house, the many overseas visitors, the frequent applause, a standing ovation at the end, seven nominations for Theatregoers Choice Awards 2005, and the plans to open the play in New York in November 2005 show that many people love it. Perhaps they are Lloyd Webber or Michael Crawford fans rather than readers of Wilkie Collins. In the seduction scene of Marian – I am not making this up – Fosco sings “I can get away with everything because I have no shame”. Mmmm.

The *Woman in White* is at London's Palace Theatre. It has been beautifully restored by Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Company which has managed to persuade the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate Gallery to lend two relevant works for temporary display in the foyer. These are the portrait of the young Collins by Sir John Everett Millais and Frederick Walker's famous poster for the first production of the *Woman in White* at the Olympic Theatre in the 1870s. There are also two fine pictures from Lloyd Webber's own collection. With contributions by William Clarke and Andrew Gasson, an interesting exhibition on Collins is staged in the corridor next to the stalls bar and memorabilia are on sale downstairs. The show runs until 3 September 2005. Tickets from the box office on 0870 895 5579. More on www.womaninwhitethemusical.com

THE HAUNTED HOTEL

The Haunted Hotel is a successful adaptation of Collins's 1879 ghost story by Philip Dart and Val May and has toured England for the last two months. The construction of the play is based on the story within a story. Sir Francis Westwick, a relative of the Westwicks of Collins actual novel is an actor manager in desperate need of a hit to save his failing Majestic Theatre in 1900. He invites the famous actor Gerald Ivor and his leading lady to a midnight reading of a new play which follows the plot of *The Haunted Hotel* originally set by Collins in 1860. This is a clever way of presenting the story, combining Collins's mystery and suspense with some on and off stage hauntings to surprise both the cast within a cast and the real life audience. Although a novel approach, some of these extra dramatic happenings do distract from the main storyline which otherwise fairly accurately presents Collins's original plot.

The play stars Colin Baker as an excellent Sir Francis – a part which was originally to have been taken by Brian Blessed – Lynette McMorrough as Lady Westwick, Dominic Kemp as Gerald Ivor, Elizabeth Counsell as Maria Cavenna, Louise Breckon-Richards as Evelyn Collier and Richard Hodder as Albert Denny. The play is directed by Val May. His co-adaptor, Philip Dart, was responsible for a previous production of *The Haunted Hotel* by the Charmel Theatre Company in 1992.

GONG DONKEYS

Gong Donkeys is an unconventional play which neatly slips Wilkie Collins into the humorous but rather sad storyline along with Charles Dickens and Ellen Ternan. The play is set in the rough end of Doncaster where the bookish David from the smart side of town comes to stay with his aunt and uncle during the school holidays whilst his mother is in a mental hospital because of her husband's infidelities. Cleverly interwoven with the real life drama of his parents' imminent divorce is his uncle Robert's obsession with the Dickens and Collins journey to Doncaster in 1857. The trip of course was a subterfuge of Dickens to be in Doncaster for Race Week where he could meet the young actress Ellen Ternan. Soon after, he was himself to separate from Catherine Dickens. The publicity material describes the play as "a story about storytelling" which it does on several levels including the amateur theatricals into which David is drawn by his cousin Charlene and her two backward, misfit friends, Gobbo and Wink.

Dickens and Collins jointly wrote up their expedition in the ‘Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, published in *Household Words* 3-31 October 1857. Uncle Robert in one scene of *Gong Donkeys* relates Collins’s story of ‘The Double-Bedded Room’ which was later republished as ‘Brother Morgan’s story of The Dead Hand’ in *The Queen of Hearts* (1859). ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’ where Collins assumes the role of Thomas Idle and Dickens that of Francis Goodchild also involves storytelling. But the other theme of assumed identity is picked up in *Gong Donkeys*. The title was a term coined by Dickens to describe the Doncaster rowdies who made a noise between a gong and the braying of a donkey.

Gong Donkeys was written by Richard Cameron (author of *The Glee Club*) and directed by Mike Bradwell. It was staged at the Bush theatre in London’s Shepherd’s Bush from 3 November to 11 December. For those who missed the production, the text of the play has been published by Methuen (ISBN 0 413 77494 5).

THE WOMAN IN WHITE ON RADIO 2

A new reading of *The Woman in White* has begun on BBC Radio 2. Abridged by Paul Kent into eight fifteen minute episodes, the adaptation is read by actor Dougray Scott. It is broadcast in the UK on Fridays from 10 December at 9.15pm GMT, but pauses over Christmas and New Year. You can listen to each episode for up to a week after transmission on the internet at www.bbc.co.uk/radio2.

MILLAIS’S DRAWINGS

John Everett Millais (1829-1896) was a lifelong friend of Wilkie. A founder of the pre-Raphaelite movement, he later became President of the Royal Academy. His paintings are still well known but an exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery – transferring later to London – celebrates his less familiar drawings. Millais was a superb draughtsman who, even as his fame grew, continued to produce illustrations for books and periodicals. His first book illustration was the frontispiece for Collins’s *Mr Wray’s Cash-Box* dated 1852 but published for the Christmas market in 1851. Birmingham Gallery unearthed a preliminary drawing for this work, previously misclassified, which is shown beside a fine example of the first edition of the book. The exhibition runs until 17 January and will move to Leighton House, 12 Holland Park Road, London W14 8LZ from 19 February to 29 April 2005.

THE SECRET LIFE OF WILKIE COLLINS

The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins has recently been republished by Sutton Publishing and its author, William Clarke, writes:

“This latest paperback edition of my biography of Wilkie Collins, first published in 1988, was deliberately timed to coincide with the opening of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *The Woman in White* at the Palace Theatre, London, on September 15. It seemed an opportunity to extend interest in the novelist to an even wider audience. Copies are on sale at the theatre.

It also gave me an opportunity to up-date the biography in the light of subsequent publications about Collins, especially Catherine Peters’ *The King of Inventors: A Life*

of *Wilkie Collins* (1991) and Andrew Gasson's *Wilkie Collins – An Illustrated Guide* (1998). The new edition also covers the dramatic appearance of the manuscript of Wilkie's first novel *Iolani* in New York in 1991 and its first publication in 1999. It had been turned down by both Longmans and Chapman and Hall in the mid-1840s. As Wilkie himself subsequently confessed: 'My youthful imagination ran riot among the noble savages, in scenes which caused the respectable publisher to declare that it was impossible to put his name on the title-page of such a novel.'

The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins by William Clarke. Sutton Publishing, Third Paperback Edition, ISBN 0 7509 37661, 2004 Price £7.99.

A NEW PUBLICATION

One of Wilkie's most popular short stories 'A Terribly Strange Bed' has been republished by Broadview press in a new collection, *Victorian Short Stories* edited by Dennis Denisoff of Ryerson University, Toronto. A bargain at £12.99. ISBN 1 551113562. Broadview over the last few years have published excellent critical editions of *The Evil Genius*, *The Moonstone*, *Heart and Science* and more recently *Blind Love*.

NEW BIOGRAPHIES

The monumental Oxford Dictionary of National Biography was published in September. Its 60 volumes contain new biographies of Wilkie (by WCS member Catherine Peters, author of *The King of Inventors*); his brother Charles (by WCS member William Baker); his father William Collins RA (by Diane Perkins); and his aunt, the painter Margaret Carpenter (by WCS member Richard Smith). The 50,000 entries also include biographies of many of Wilkie's friends and colleagues. The printed version is probably out of most people's reach at £7,500 – even if shelf space were available to house it. There is, however, an online subscription which gives access to the same data in an easily searchable and more versatile form which will have the advantage of regular quarterly updates. This is also expensive at £195 a year but you can take a trial subscription for three months at £50 and download all the pieces you want – or go to a good library and photocopy them. More information is available at <mailto:onlineproducts@oup.com> or fax: +44 (0) 1865 353308

COLLINS'S LETTERS

The collected edition of all known letters written by Wilkie Collins is on schedule for publication in June 2005. Proofs are being checked as you read this and the editors are very excited by the wealth of new material that has been unearthed and the numerous new connections and deductions that have been made. Its 1,600 pages will contain nearly 3,000 letters, more than 2000 of which have never been published anywhere before. *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* will be a major contribution to Collins scholarship. The four volume set from Pickering & Chatto will be £350. ISBN 1 85196 764 8.

WEEKLY WILKIE

A new website lets you read nineteenth century serial novels in weekly parts, exactly as the Victorian reader did, week by week. www.hapka.com/mousehold currently has two Collins novels: *The Woman in White* and *No Name* which will be emailed to you once a week. The text is not the original from the periodical publication but a later book edition divided up into the equivalent weekly portions. It can be very compulsive! You have to register, but there is no charge. The site also contains work by Dickens, Dumas, Stevenson, Reade and Lytton. More will be added.

J. K. ROWLING ON COLLINS

The Moonstone is 'a cracking read' according to the author J. K. Rowling. Speaking in Edinburgh at a reading of her work, the creator of Harry Potter told the audience "The last novel that I read was Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, which I have been meaning to read for years. It is a cracking read. I have just been on holiday and, for the first time in five years, I did not take any Iris Murdoch with me because it is so depressing. I was just about to put one in my case and I thought, "Why do this? Why put yourself through this?" so I didn't bother. I read Wilkie Collins instead and it was a much better experience."

CHRIS WILLIS

Members will be saddened to hear of the death of Victorian scholar Chris Willis at the age of 44. Chris joined the Wilkie Collins Society in 1996. She edited editions of both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* and recently produced an edition of the first novel of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Trail of the Serpent*. Chris believed the boy detective in this book was the inspiration for Gooseberry in *The Moonstone*. She never sent an email without appending a note on her latest political campaign – whether against the Iraq war, for the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, or to protect hedgerows or Victorian buildings. She will be missed. Her best memorial is her own website www.chriswillis.freeserve.co.uk which scholars are working to preserve. It is hard to realise the creative force behind it is no more.

NO NAME

US bookseller, John Motavalli of Connecticut, apart from selling Collins titles is a dedicated fan. Like many of us he was first hooked on Wilkie by reading *The Woman in White*. His current project, however, is a screen adaptation of *No Name* which he has co-written with a colleague. This has apparently attracted some interest in the States and he is hopeful that it might result in a screen or television version.

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Membership subscriptions are due on 1 January. If you have not paid for 2005 – a few have already sent in their dues – there is a separate reminder with this Newsletter. If it has crossed with your subscription, then please ignore it.

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