



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

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WCS JOURNAL

Enclosed with this Newsletter is the latest issue, Volume 8, of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* in our usual A5 format. We are as ever extremely grateful to our editors, Graham Law and Lillian Nayder, for their painstaking efforts and skill in producing such a worthwhile publication.

BOOK AND MAGAZINE COLLECTOR

Wilkie Collins features in an extensive fifteen page article by Richard Dalby in the December issue of *Book and Magazine Collector*. The essay gives a good biographical resume of Collins's life set against the background of his published works. The piece is excellently illustrated with many of the pictures, such as Wilkie's own copy of *The Woman in White* play and examples of two and three-decker novels, apparently taken from recent catalogues. Overall they give a real flavour of nineteenth century publishing. In keeping with the style of the publication, Dalby gives the prices of books achieved at auction over the last few years. The piece concludes with a useful bibliography of Collins's works, divided into Novels, short stories, collaborations with Dickens, and non-fiction. Added to the titles are estimates of current values for English and US editions in original cloth. Thus *Antonina* is judged at £1,000; the UK *Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* at £8,000; and the later novels between £600-£800. Although Dalby gives figures of £800-£1,000, there are problems in attempting values for some difficult titles, particularly the early works such as *Basil* and *Hide and Seek*, since some of these haven't appeared for sale in their original bindings for many years. On balance, this is an excellent article for the Collins collector.

A LETTER FROM DICKENS TO COLLINS

There is an interesting item for sale in the latest Holiday Selection catalogue from the Heritage Bookshop in California. Number 132 is a letter from Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins dated 20 January 1863. It is written from the Hotel du Helder during one of Dickens's trips to Paris and addressed to "My Dear Wilkie". The full text of the letter is published on pp. 198-199 of volume ten in the Pilgrim Edition of Dickens's letters. The letter is full of hints, and the annotations suggest that Dickens was spending a week away with Ellen Ternan. Dickens letters to Wilkie are now extremely uncommon but perhaps this is not quite a bargain at \$8,500. The Heritage Bookshop can be contacted at 8540 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90069 or heritage@heritagebookshop.com,

ON THIS DAY

The recently published *On This Day* by Sandra Kimberley Hall gives historical events for each day of the year. Wilkie is duly mentioned for 8 January 1824, a birthday he shares with Steven Hawkins (of Time fame, in 1942) and David Bowie (1947). Also on this day Marco Polo died in 1324; Bonnie Prince Charlie occupied Stirling in Scotland in 1746; and Charles de Gaulle was proclaimed first President of the Fifth Republic of France. There is, however, nothing recorded for Collins on 23 September although on this date in 490 BC Pheidippides, an Athenian courier, ran to Sparta to request help when the Persians landed at Marathon. After the battle and another run back to Athens Pheidippides apparently died of exhaustion. This is the same fate that befell some modern marathon runners during 2005 – and they say that exercise is good for you!

Wilkie was ambivalent about exercise in general although his favourite past time was sailing. The recently published *Letters* inform us that he wrote in 1857 that "want of exercise has ended in the return of some of my old bilious miseries"; and in 1879 "When this work is done, the exercise begins – or there is no health for me"; and in 1882 "Exercise and diluted champagne still keep the gout at its near distance." On the other hand, he couldn't resist commenting in *I Say No!* (1884) "The worst curse of human life is the detestable necessity of taking exercise."

P. D. JAMES ON 'OPEN BOOK'

Our distinguished Patron, P. D. James, has become a regular contributor to the airwaves. In addition to her appearances on 'Any Questions' she recently took part in a half-hour special on BBC Radio 4's Sunday

afternoon programme 'Open Book' on 8 October. During the interview, she discussed at length her celebrated detective, Adam Dalgleish, and introduced her new book, *The Lighthouse*. This has all the ingredients of an archetypal detective story, taking place within a closed community set on an island. Other topics ranged over her other numerous works, her background, and personal life and beliefs. Apart from her well-known liking for Wilkie Collins, P. D. James is also enthusiastic about the works of Anthony Trollope.

It is good to welcome another 'Lighthouse', 150 years after Wilkie's play with the same title was published in 1855. The 2005 *Lighthouse* is published by Faber and Faber (ISBN 0-571-229 18-2) and of course available from 'all good bookshops'.

CHARLES DICKENS STUDIES

Palgrave Macmillan has recently announced its new title *Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens Studies*. The editors are Robert L. Patten and John Bowen, both leading authorities on Dickens. The blurb describes "A comprehensive and authoritative guide to the study of one of the most important Victorian novelists with an international team of contributors. The volume is based on the latest research bringing readers a comprehensive guide to the most important contemporary work on Dickens." (ISBN 1-4039-1285-8, hardback at £55; ISBN 1-4039-1286-6, paperback at £16.99).

M. E. BRADDON SYMPOSIUM

The University of Wales Swansea is planning a symposium on Mary Elizabeth Braddon for 26 April 2006. Braddon, of course, acknowledged the influence of Wilkie Collins as "assuredly my literary father".

The one-day conference "seeks to draw together scholars working on all aspects of Braddon's life and fiction." Suggested topics might be Braddon and the literary marketplace; the theatre; the sensation novel; influences on and by other writers; social commentary in her fiction; autobiographical elements; and adaptations of her works.

The deadline for abstracts, which should be 150-200 words, is 31 January 2006. Those interested in the event and wishing to be placed on the mailing list can contact braddonconference@ntlworld.com. The conference co-ordinator is Jessica Cox.

MURDER MOST FOUL

Long-standing member, Angela Richardson, has discovered a new CD 'talking book' entitled *Murder Most Foul* which contains a reading of 'Who Killed Zebedee' by Derek Jacobi'. Other stories in the collection are Margery Allingham's 'Bluebeard's Bathtub', Robert Barr's 'An Alpine Divorce'; and Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Speckled Band'.

'Who Killed Zebedee' is a short story of revenge, murder and detection, originally published in the United States paper, *The Spirit of the Times*, on the 25 December 1880. It was reprinted in Collins's collection of short stories, *Little Novels*, during 1887 under the revised title 'Mr Policeman and the Cook'.

THE WILKIE COLLINS LIST

Angela currently runs the Wilkie Collins list which provides a very useful exchange of information. For those WCS members not familiar with the web-based list, it can be contacted through <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wilkiecollins/>. The group is currently rereading Wilkie's novels in chronological sequence. It has recently finished *Basil* (1852) and has just commenced *Hide and Seek* (1854).

MRS LIRRIPER

In the mid 1850s, Wilkie's brother Charles gave up art and from 1858 earned his living by writing. His work is seldom republished but a new book *Mrs Lirriper* reproduces two Christmas numbers from Dickens's periodical *All The Year Round* and includes two of Charles's pieces. 'How the Best Attic Was under a Cloud' first appeared at Christmas 1863 in *Mrs Lirriper's Lodgings* and 'A Past Lodger Relates a Wild Story of a Doctor' a year later in *Mrs Lirriper's Legacy*. Other contributors included Dickens himself, Elizabeth Gaskell, Edmund Yates and Hesba Stretton. At this time Wilkie was not contributing to the Christmas numbers. *Mrs Lirriper* (edited by Philip Hensher), Hesperus Press (ISBN 1-84391-131-0 £12.99). Another Charles Collins story is in *Mugby Junction* also from Hesperus ISBN 1843911299. More from www.hesperuspress.com

THE DEAD ALIVE

Wilkie's short story 'The Dead Alive' has been reprinted with a long commentary by Rob Warden, the Executive Director of the Centre on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. He is

a campaigner against miscarriages of justice and says that the Boom case on which ‘The Dead Alive’ is based was the first documented wrongful conviction for murder in the USA. He reprints in full Stephen Boom’s false confession to the murder with his brother Jesse of Russell Colvin. Collins named the Boom brothers Ambrose and Silas Meadowcroft and the victim John Jago. Warden points out that DNA tests would today have prevented the conviction of the Booms. But he then gives brief summaries of eleven other wrongly convicted defendants in ‘dead alive’ cases – where the alleged murder victim was in fact not dead. And the book ends with a chilling list of 235 people sentenced to death for murder in the United States who were subsequently exonerated. He picks out in bold 59 of them who were convicted on the basis of their own false confession.

‘The Dead Alive’ was first published in 1873 in the USA during Wilkie’s American reading tour. He had read the printed account of the Boom case and wrote the story in New York. It was retitled ‘John Jago’s Ghost on its 1874 publication in the UK in *The Frozen Deep and Other Tales*.

Wilkie Collins’s The Dead Alive – The Novel, the Case, and Wrongful Convictions, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 2005. (ISBN 0- 8101-2294-4, available through amazon.com for \$16.47).

OTHER REPRINTS

A number of hard to find Collins books have been republished recently. Wilkie’s first collection of short stories *After Dark* has been reissued in large print by Dodo Press (ISBN 1406501 158 £12.99). Although all the stories are available elsewhere, the framing and linking material is not – so it is good to have the book republished in full. Dodo Press also published *Armada* in June 2005 (ISBN 1905432143 £24.99). Frontlist Books publishes *The Frozen Deep* (ISBN J-84350-092-2 for £5.99). Aegypan issued *Mr Wray’s Cash Box* (ISBN 1598184393 for £8.95). And Echo Books claims to have practically the whole Collins canon in paperback form for £12.99 each. Many of these editions are in fact print- on-demand books using publicly available e-texts. It may be cheaper to download them and print them off yourself. A full list of e-texts is on www.wilkiecollins.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION

Guardian Unlimited and Penguin Books have launched a competition for readers to submit a photograph to illustrate the cover for a new Penguin

edition of *The Woman in White*. Covers for three other books are also in the competition: *Hell's Angels* by Hunter S. Thompson, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. The winner of each will get a top of the range Nikon camera with a smaller Nikon for the runner up. The closing date for all four is 30 December and the short-listed photographs can be seen later in January at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/competition/0,13349,1595739,00.html>

WILKIE ON THE AIRWAVES

With this newsletter is *Wilkie on the Airwaves* by Paul Lewis. Using BBC archives and *Radio Times* Paul has put together the most complete account yet of readings and dramatizations of Collins's stories on BBC television and radio together with other items about or involving Collins.

OBITUARY

Derek Aylward – who took the role of Godfrey Ablewhite in the 1959 BBC TV production of *The Moonstone* – died on 9 July 2005 aged 82. Aylward appeared in small roles in a few pre-war films and got his break with ENSA in a 1944 production of Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*. From 1950 to 1970 he appeared in the West End and in a number of television roles including one in *The Prisoner* in 1964. He is once rumoured to have demanded his pay in guineas rather than pounds. It was the difference, he said, between “being treated as a gentleman and being treated like a tradesman”.

THE HAUNTED HOTEL

Philip Dart and Val May's freely adapted stage version of *The Haunted Hotel* was revived on a three month UK tour from September to November with William Gaunt, Dominic Kemp, and Susannah York in the key roles. Despite the cast, reviews were disappointing.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE IN NEW YORK

Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical production of *The Woman in White* opened at New York's Marquis Theatre on 17 November with much of the original London cast including Michael Ball, who took over the role of Fosco from Michael Crawford, Maria Friedman as Marian and Jill Paice as Laura. Initial reviews were mixed, though Friedman won much praise for going back on stage weeks after an operation for breast cancer. Sadly, she had to give up the role for further medical treatment in the

middle of December. Brendan Lemon for the *Financial Times* “liked the rat” but little else. Kamal Al-Soyaylee for *The Globe and Mail* thought it a “predictable approach to a great book” but liked the local Toronto actor Adam Brazier as Hartright. The *New York Post* was more enthusiastic; Clive Barnes found it “a thrilling musical with a weirdly engrossing tale full of artifice and spine-chiller twists.”

Meanwhile in London critics were invited back to the Palace Theatre to see the new stars – Simon Callow as Fosco and Ruthie Henshall as Marian. Callow was replaced at the end of November by David Burt as the show clocked up its 500th performance. Charles Spencer of *The Daily Telegraph* at least revised his opinion of a “terrible disappointment” to praise the slightly revised score though the rest remained “fatally misconceived.” Tickets are available up to 1 April 2006.

CHRISTMAS

Wilkie’s general dislike of “this awful Christmas-time” contrasted with his use of it to sell his works. Christmas books began with *Mr Wray’s Cash Box* published for Christmas 1851 and ended with *The Guilty River* for 1886. Stories spanned more than thirty years too, from ‘The Fourth Poor Traveller’ in the Christmas edition of *Household Words* to ‘The First Officer’s Confession’ in *Spirit of the Times* Christmas 1887. For more on Christmas publications and with eleven quotes from his letters about “the season of Cant and Christmas” see the new and revised menu item 7 at www.wilkiecollins.com.

LAST AND DEFINITELY LEAST – A WILKIE PASTICHE

Not recommended at all is *The Rag and Bone Shop* by Jeff Rackham, a Professor of English at the University of North Carolina-Asheville. Rackham weaves together the known facts and some speculation about Dickens’s relationship with the young actress Ellen Ternan to create a wholly unbelievable tale about an illegitimate child born in France and Wilkie Collins’s role in its disappearance. Although Rackham sticks vaguely to the known facts of Dickens’s life, he gets almost every detail of Collins wrong from his relationships with his own women friends to his close friendship with Dickens and ends up with a plot so preposterous as to be laughable rather than annoying. Like the other professorial pasticher William Palmer he delights in making up scenes of sexual debauchery – though in Rackham’s case he excuses Dickens from taking part in most of these. The story is told in interlinked narratives by Ellen Ternan, Dickens’s sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth (who maintains a

fantasy that she is in fact Dickens's secret wife) and by Collins himself. Never published outside the USA The Rag and Bone Shop is only mentioned for those who might want it as part of a Wilkie pastiche collection. Originally published in 2001 by Zoland Books (ISBN 1- 58195-105-1) and later by Penguin (ISBN 0-14-200225-951400).

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