



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2006

ANOTHER 'RAMBLES AROUND MARYLEBONE'

As mentioned in an earlier Newsletter, the WCS is planning a summer walk in conjunction with Andrew Duncan's London Explorers Group (LEG). The route will mainly follow our earlier 'Rambles Around Marylebone' in 2000 but new information has come to light with the publication of Wilkie's letters in *The Public Face* and we hope to add some new sites to the itinerary. The walk will be led jointly by Paul Lewis and Andrew Gasson with occasional interruptions from Andrew Duncan.

The walk will take place on the afternoon of Sunday 2 July 2006. It will commence at 2.00 pm from the Windsor Castle pub, 98 Park Road, London, NW1 4SH (020 7723 9262). This is on the right hand side of the road, about five minutes walk north of Marylebone Road and Baker Street underground station. Members might like to meet up and join other participants from LEG from 1.00 pm.

To have an idea of the probable support for the walk, we would appreciate it if members would contact us if they think they are likely to come along (preferably by email to Andrew Gasson on apogee@apgee.co.uk). Also, as we may not manage another Newsletter before the walk, check on the www.wilkiecollins.com website the week before in case there are any last minute changes to the arrangements.

Andrew Duncan is the author of *Walking London*, *Secret London* and other well-known London guides and launched LEG to introduce Londoners to the history, heritage and geography of their home city, mainly by means of guided walks. Other LEG walks take place once a

month on Sundays. If you would like to go on the LEG mailing list to receive details of walks and other events, please email info@leglondon.co.uk or send your details to LEG, 2b Gastein Road, London W6 8LU. Walk information will also be posted on the internet at www.leglondon.co.uk.

COLLINS IN *HOUSEHOLD WORDS*

Our latest reprint continues to make available those works of Wilkie Collins which have not been republished since their original appearance in print during the nineteenth century. The enclosed publication includes ‘Strike!’, ‘Highly Proper!’ and ‘A Breach of British Privilege’ These three essays have been prepared with an introduction by Paul Lewis and originally appeared in *Household Words* in the 1850s. We hope to republish further essays to go out with a subsequent Newsletter.

***THE WOMAN IN WHITE* IN LEICESTER**

Also accompanying this Newsletter is ‘The Mystery of *The Woman in White* in Leicester’. This is the result of Open University scholar Valerie Pedlar’s careful research into early productions of the play.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

Any new critical edition of Collins’s works by Broadview Press is eagerly anticipated. Following their previous publications, *Heart and Science*, *The Evil Genius*, *The Moonstone* and *Blind Love*, we now have *The Woman in White*. The earlier Broadview texts have all been extremely well annotated and published with a wealth of contextual matter which is often worth the price of the book on its own.

The editors of this new edition, Maria K. Bachmann and Don Richard Cox should be well known to Collins readers with their recent editorship of both *Blind Love* and *Reality’s Dark Light*. *The Woman in White* ably follows in their earlier footsteps. The editors have consulted the original manuscript of the novel although the text “that electrified readers in 1859-60” is taken from the original weekly publication in Dickens’s *All the Year Round* and attempts “to preserve that excitement ... by indicating all serial breaks so modern readers will be forced to pause and take a breath.”

The scholarly introduction includes the main themes of the novel: Sensation fiction, Composition History, Narrative Structure, Victorian

Psychology and Mesmerism, Marriage and the “Woman Question”, “The Italian Question”, and the Dramatic Adaptation. There follows a detailed note on the text and the edition also includes engravings from later Smith Elder and Chatto & Windus publications.

The notes, especially those about English geographical locations, seem mainly intended for a North American audience. There is, however, a good deal to inform modern UK readers whether it concerns a description of bathing machines, contemporary social customs, class structure of nineteenth century England, Victorian recreations or the history of and differences between a brougham, a chaise and a dog cart.

As we have come to expect from Broadview, there are several useful additions to the main body of the text. Appendix A includes prefaces to the English editions of 1860 and 1861 together with a translation of that for the first French edition by E. D. Forgues, also in 1861 (WCS members may recall that Paul Lewis made a similar translation in 1998 to accompany the Spring Newsletter). There is a sample page from *All the Year Round* while Appendix C includes several commentaries and reviews, usefully presented at length.

The debate over ‘The Woman Question’, originally raised in the introduction, is expanded upon with supporting articles in Appendix D. One of the important themes of *The Woman in White* is the misuse of lunatic asylums and this forms the basis for Appendix E together with articles on the ‘Mesmeric Mania of 1851’. The last of these is the text of Collins’s first letter in the ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home’ series, originally published in *The Leader* of 17 January 1852 (once again, this will be familiar to WCS members from our August 2001 reprint). The additional matter ends with a usefully set out bibliography.

With the Broadview text of *The Moonstone*, we were treated to the text of the play. If we could wish for one extra inclusion in this current volume, it would be the text of Collins’s own dramatic version of *The Woman in White*. The play was originally ‘published by the author’ in a very small edition and is now virtually unobtainable. The editors have, however, taken the trouble to consult a copy for the relevant section of the introduction.

Overall, this is an excellent critical edition of *The Woman in White* which fulfils our expectations. It has been prepared with great thoroughness by two editors well versed in Collins studies and gives the earliest published version of Collins’s text. It provides a lengthy introduction covering

most of the important issues raised by the novel. The annotations have been carefully researched and the various Appendixes succeed in furnishing the reader with exactly the right sort of contextual and background matter to give a better understanding of the story (ISBN 1-55111-12345).

A DRAMATIC VERSION OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

For most of us without access to Collins's original and not wishing to spend \$65,000 on the copy available on the internet, a relatively new dramatic version of *The Woman in White* is the adaptation from Collins's novel by Constance Cox. This three act play is produced by the well known firm of theatrical publishers, Samuel French, in their series of Acting Editions (ISBN 0 573 11578 8) and is available for £7.50 from their own bookshop at 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5JR (020 7255 4300; www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk).

Constance Cox was a very well known dramatist for film and television, specialising in the classics such as *Pickwick Papers*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. There is a 'French connection' with Collins going back to 1867 when Samuel French in New York published an adaptation of *No Thoroughfare* by Louis Lequel (No. 348 of their Standard Drama series). This was performed at Mrs. F. B. Conway's Park Theatre, Brooklyn, 6 January 1868.

The current publication of *The Woman in White* as a play seems something of a mystery since it was first issued in 2005 although Constance Cox died in 1998 and over the last few years there have been several amateur productions of her adaptation. In 2005, for example, it was staged at King's Lynn, the Riverhead Theatre, Louth, and by the Durham Dramatic Society. These last two apparently played to respectively 85% and 96% capacity. This year there has already been a production by the Cuffely Players.

According to the Samuel French, Inc. website (based in New York) there are two other versions rather further removed from Wilkie's original. *The Woman in White* by Tim Kelly and Jack Sharkey is a musical adaptation sub-titled 'A Cautionary Tale of Monstrous Evil and Black hearted Villainy in Song and Dance' and described as "a loony musical spoof of Wilkie Collins' grim Gothic novel. Amid murder, madness, betrayal and vile deeds, the music is merry. There are even two fiendish murders set to music! The central character, villainous Sir Percival Glyde, and his

cohort in crime Countess Fosco (Proprietor of a madhouse) are two of the vilest – and funniest – foul fiends ever set to toe tapping music.

Egad, The Woman in White (Sealed in a Madhouse) by Tim Kelly is described as a “laugh oriented, old fashioned melodrama based on Wilkie Collins’ classic and it’s wild, fast and funny. It features a disreputable (and hilarious) villain who dispatches his adversaries with nefarious ease and even seals his wife in a madhouse to steal her vast fortune! He battles a wicked countess in one of the most uproarious fight scenes ever staged! When all else fails, he engineers mock funerals. But he’s scared of the mysterious “woman in white” who’s escaped from the asylum to seek him out. Abandoned wives, insolent servants, lawyers, hypochondriacs and manly drawing masters parade across the stage in gales of comedy terminating only when the villain is brought to justice in an audience cheering, outrageous and spectacular finale.”

Those interested can compare these modern versions with Wilkie’s own dramatisation at James Rusk’s comprehensive website to be found at <http://www.blackmask.com/jrusk/wcollins/wiw/wiw.html>.

FORTHCOMING PRODUCTIONS OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

The production by the Cuffley Players is to be repeated as part of the Hertford Theatre Week on Thursday 27 April 2006. The box office can be contacted on 01707 873856.

The Woman in White will also be performed by the Bedford Dramatic Society from 26-30 September. It appears that they are still auditioning so that any WCS thespians can obtain further details :from www.bedforddramaticclub.org.uk. Otherwise tickets will be available from the Central Box Office, Harpur Suite, Harpur Street, Bedford MK40 1LA (01234 269519).

***THE WOMAN IN WHITE* – THE MUSICAL**

The £4 million musical version of *The Woman in White* at London’s Palace Theatre closed on 25 February after a successful run of nineteen months. It will be replaced in October by Monty Python’s *Spamalot*. In a more surprising move, the New York production at Broadway’s Marquis Theater closed on 17 February less than three months after it opened. The star Maria Friedman had quit the show almost at once due to cancer and Michael Ball who played Fosco missed many performances

due to a viral infection. Producer Andrew Lloyd Webber told reporters “There have been performances when two or more leads have been absent due to illness. I’m not sure even *The Phantom Of The Opera* could have survived the illnesses which have beset this wonderful company.” Reuters reported that only 30 out of 129 New York performances included the full original cast and that the musical had lost \$8 million. With mixed reviews and barely half the seats filled its end in NY was inevitable. By contrast, Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera* recently became the longest-running show in Broadway history passing 7,486 performances. There are reports that the musical is to be ‘reversioned’ for a year long, British tour in 2007.

DICKENSIAN PERILS

An article by Michael Hollington in the Winter 2005 issue of *The Dickensian* examines ‘The Perils of Certain English Prisoners’ written by Dickens and Collins. Published as the 1857 Christmas number of *Household Words* the piece concerns treachery and piracy in Central America. Hollington argues that previous attempts to see it as an allegory for Britain’s colonial role in India are wrong, despite evidence to that effect from Dickens’s own letters. In fact it was about Central America and the search there for gold and a route from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He also sees the story as one of collaboration between Dickens and Collins, cooperatively building on each other’s work rather than showing the rivalry between them that Lillian Nayder (whom Hollington calls ‘Najder’ throughout) found in *Unequal Partners* (Cornell, 2002).

P. D. JAMES ON TELEVISION

Following her recent appearance on BBC Radio’s ‘Open Book’, WCS Patron P. D. James was the subject of an hour long interview with Mark Lawson on BBC 4 television. This took place on Saturday 11 March and was repeated the following night. With the extra time available for a lengthy interview, the delightful and leisurely conversation covered a whole range of subjects, including her early personal life, how she writes her books, and her methods of working out plots and clues in advance.

ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

The annual meeting and combined AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies is this year being sponsored jointly by the Jane Austen and Burney societies. It will take place in Bath over the weekend of 13 and 14 May in the Abbey Church Rooms, Westgate. There will be talks by

Maggie Lane and Angela Barlow, guided walks and various social events. Further details and links from the Alliance website at <http://www.sndc.demon.co.uk/>.

WILKIE LIVES ON

Sex and the City star Sarah Jessica Parker and her husband Hollywood actor Matthew Broderick have named their son after Wilkie Collins. Parker described Collins to *Guardian* journalist Jess Cartner-Morley as “their favourite author”. James Wilkie, born on 28 October 2002, is also named for Broderick’s father, James.

WILKIE ON THE RADIO

WCS member Barry Pike has found five more adaptations of Wilkie’s work on BBC radio (see *Wilkie on the Airwaves* with the Winter 2005 Newsletter). They include a 1960 twelve part serial of *The Woman in White*, a 1970 four part adaptation of *The Dead Secret* and a 1973 *No Name* in six episodes. Further contributions welcome.

M. E. BRADDON SYMPOSIUM

WCS members are reminded of the Mary Elizabeth Braddon conference to be held at the University of Wales Swansea on Saturday 22 April 2006. Further details and booking arrangements are available on <http://www.braddonsymposium.co.uk/>.

LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL

The 2006 Ledbury Poetry Festival will be held from 30 June to 9 July. There will be the usual wide range of contributors and the traditional poetry competition. For a free programme, telephone 0845 458 1743 or look at <https://ledburypoetry.org.uk/>.

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