



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2007

WILKIE COLLINS AT THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS

Accompanying this Newsletter is 'Wilkie Collins and his Last Dinner at the Society of Authors'. This piece was prompted by a previously unrecorded letter from Collins to James Stanley Little which recently appeared at auction. Little was the executive secretary of the Society of Authors and Wilkie was enclosing his payment of 10/6 for the dinner which is discussed in the article.

BOTALLACK MINE

Also with this Newsletter is a 'Description of the Visit by Wilkie Collins to Botallack Mine'. This has been written by long standing WCS member Pierre Tissot van Patot from Holland and gives an excellent modern perspective on what Wilkie would have seen during his walking tour of Cornwall. Collins's description of the mine was originally published as Chapter XI of *Rambles Beyond Railways* in 1851 and in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for April 1851.

JOINT EVENT WITH THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP

The Wilkie Collins Society and the Dickens Fellowship are holding a joint event on the evening of 4 October in London at Barnard's Inn Hall EC1N 2HH which is in Holborn. The talk will be given by WCS membership secretary Paul Lewis on the correspondence of Dickens and Collins. There will probably be a small charge. Further details will be given in the Summer Newsletter.

WILKIE IN THE WOOD

Andrew Gasson has agreed to give a talk to the St John's Wood Society at 7.00 pm on Tuesday, 30th October at St. John's Wood Church, London NW8. This is situated by the St. John's Wood Roundabout next to Lords cricket ground. The provisional title is 'Wilkie in the Wood'. There will be a small charge for the evening and members of the WCS will be very welcome. Details should be finalised in time for the Summer Newsletter.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MEMBERS

We are always pleased to receive a contribution from members. This could be just a snippet of news for the Newsletter or a full length article. The latter could in turn be a serious academic essay for the WCS *Journal* (which should be addressed to editors Graham Law or Lillian Nayder); or possibly a more informal piece to accompany a Newsletter (which can be emailed to Andrew Gasson or Paul Lewis).

REALITY'S DARK LIGHT FROM TENNESSEE

Reality's Dark Light was originally published in 2003 as part of the Tennessee Studies in Literature series. The thirteen Collins essays are edited by Maria K. Bachman, assistant professor of English at Coastal Carolina University, and Don Richard Cox, professor of English and associate dean at the University of Tennessee. WCS members will also recall their collaborations for the Broadview Press editions of *Blind Love* and *The Woman in White*.

The book, normally available at \$40, is currently on sale from the University of Tennessee Press at the bargain price of \$10. Further details can be had from <https://utpress.org/title/realitys-dark-light/>.

BUT MEMBERS ARE ADVISED TO BE VERY CAREFUL WHEN PURCHASING ONLINE. The checkout price may still show as \$40 and personal experience has proved it to be extremely difficult to obtain a credit card refund to obtain the book at the advertised price.

THE HAUNTED HOTEL FOR SALE

Collectors of Collins's works may be interested to know of a nineteenth century edition for sale. Donna Falcon recently inherited a copy of *The Haunted Hotel* which she wants to sell (although we enthusiasts might enquire why). It is the first Canadian edition published in green cloth during 1878 by Rose-Belford of Toronto.

Collins's Canadian publishers were originally Hunter, Rose who published at Collins's request a book version of *Man and Wife* in June 1870. This experiment in preventing American periodical piracy in Canada proved so effective and financially rewarding that Collins found he had created a new market for his books. By 1874 the firm had also published *Poor Miss Finch*, *The New Magdalen*, *Miss or Mrs*, *The Dead Alive*, and *American Readings* which consisted of 'The Frozen Deep' and 'The Dream Woman'.

During his reading tour of North America in 1873-74, Collins was entertained by Rose and his wife. The Hunter, Rose partnership came to an end when Hunter died in 1877 after which Rose collaborated with Belford of Chicago. Other Toronto editions included *The Law and the Lady*, *The Two Destinies*, *The Fallen Leaves*, *Heart and Science*, and *The Haunted Hotel* which was in fact the first edition in book form. Anyone interested in this particular copy can contact Donna at dtfalcon@nrtco.net. An idea of current prices can be obtained from ABE on the internet although most of the books for sale here are fairly expensively priced by book dealers.

POOR MISS FINCH AND EPILEPSY

Poor Miss Finch is included in the website for the German Museum for Epilepsy in Kork which also lists numerous other authors and their epilepsy related stories. A key part of Collins's plot revolves around Oscar Dubourg's epilepsy following a head injury and his subsequent skin discoloration from treatment with silver nitrate (dyschromia). The website features an illustration in colour entitled 'What is it?' with the following description: "This picture shows the engaged couple - the blind Lucilla and her bluish-looking fiancé. In the background, the different phases of one of Oscar's grand mal seizures are depicted. The artist has sketched the body axis in orange. This signal colour sets off the drama of the fall during the convulsion, which is portrayed in different stages (from the body standing up straight to it lying on the ground)." The website is found at <http://www.epilepsiemuseum.de/english/kunst/lucilla.html>.

WILKIE IN THE PRESS

The Woman in White featured in the *Times* Online Books Group for 6 January 2007. Every month Alyson Rudd introduces a different book and invites readers to give their opinions. She summed it up nicely in the opening paragraph with "*The Woman in White* was commissioned by Charles Dickens, a friend of Wilkie Collins, and was an immediate hit.

Collins gave the readers everything - suspense, fear, love, mystery, greed, lunacy, bravery and comedy.” There were numerous favourable opinions from *Times* readers, one of which was reprinted on the book page of 23 February. The issue for 20 January reprinted part of the original review from the *Times* of 30 October 1860.

It begins well enough with “Great in the art of mystification, Mr Wilkie Collins delights in a mystified character, and in the present novel has expended all his power in the setting forth of an enigmatical personage - the Count Fosco. Count Fosco is the great character of the novel.” It continues, however, rather less enthusiastically: “The novel will not bear a very close inspection. It is rather to be devoured whole, as a boa constrictor bolts a rabbit, than to be criticised in detail, and we gladly bear witness that it is successful, before the reader has had time to examine it, in producing an over-mastering excitement. Let no one accuse us of contradiction in cordially lauding a book in which at the same time we discover serious faults.” It was this review in the *Times* which first pointed out errors in the chronology of the book’s plot. Notwithstanding such criticism, *The Woman in White* was and still is a great success and has never been out of print since its first publication in 1860.

WILKIE IN INDIA

From the press rather further afield, in India, Wilkie is well represented in several articles published in *The Hindu* literary review. This is entirely appropriate since *The Moonstone* is the author’s other title which has never been out of print since the 1860s. Wilkie also enthusiastically received the news that *The Woman in White* was to be translated into Bengali in November 1883 and his literary agent, A. P. Watt, attempted to arrange serialisation of ‘I Say No’ in an Anglo-Indian periodical.

WILKIE’S HOME DEMOLISHED

One of the remaining houses where Wilkie lived has been demolished. The Collins family moved into 20 Avenue Road, just north of Regent’s Park, on their return from the Continent in September 1838. They stayed there for a little under two years and during that time William Collins suffered from a condition diagnosed as gout in the eyes – a painful malady which Wilkie claimed he inherited from his father. Doctors blamed the illness on many things and Wilkie wrote “the clay soil on which his house was built was suspected of having some connection with the malady of which he complained; and he was strongly recommended to take another abode, on dry gravel ground.” (*Memoirs of the Life of*

William Collins, R.A. 1847 II 166). In the summer of 1840, the family made the move to the drier soil of 85 Oxford Terrace near London's Hyde Park.

It was from 20 Avenue Road that Wilkie travelled the four miles by omnibus to board at Henry Cole's school at Highbury Place. His time at the school coincided with living at 20 Avenue Road and it was at Cole's that his story-telling powers were first realised – not by masters but by fellow pupils who bullied him into amusing them with tales.

The house was renumbered 39 in 1859. Although built in the early 19th century the house was not listed or deemed to be of any particular architectural or historic merit, though it is in the St John's Wood Conservation Area. Alterations to make its attics habitable in 1903 and the internal conversion into four flats around 1960 had resulted in the loss of its internal features. But the building was a rare survival of the original small footprint properties built on large plots in this area. Most of its neighbours were extended or replaced a century ago or more.

A detailed survey as part of the demolition application estimated in 2002 that it would cost £1.5 million for a "scholarly restoration" to its original form. Instead of insisting on that, Westminster City Council permitted its destruction and replacement by a large family home, valuing the completed site and dwelling at more than three times that figure. Today it would be worth far more. The house was pulled down last year and a concrete core of a large brick-faced luxury family home is now being built.

The planning applications and background documents can be seen at www.westminster.gov.uk. Two photographs of the house in 1999 are at www.wilkiecollins.com, menu item 11 - 'Where Wilkie Lived'.

WILKIE AND BOTANY

Clive Lovatt, a botanist currently based in Malawi, has discovered that Wilkie was one of the subscribers to a book called *Flora of Weston* by Gustavus St. Brody (1828-1901) published in 1856. Collins was a frequent visitor to Weston-super-Mare where his friend Edward Pigott lived and where he also struck up acquaintance with the doctor, Joseph Stringfield. It could have been at Stringfield's that Collins met St. Brody or at least agreed to be a subscriber to his book. The full two page article by Clive Lovatt is currently available online at the website <http://www.natstand.org.uk/pdf/StBrodyGAO005.pdf>

MP3 WILKIE

The indefatigable e-texter of Wilkie's work, James Rusk, is getting fed up with poor quality audio versions of his stories. The site www.audiobooksforfree.com has *The Moonstone*, *Blow Up With the Brig*, *The Fatal Cradle*, and *Who Killed Zebedee?* But James complains that the free downloads are of extremely poor quality. "It sounds like the narrator is in a tin can full of water." And he warns "If you want to download a higher quality version, you have to pay." He invites retired or aspiring actors to step in to form a site of well read, free Wilkie Collins stories in mp3 format.

HARRIET IN WILTSHIRE

An excellent but brief biography of Wilkie's mother Harriet Collins will be published in a forthcoming edition of *Wiltshire Life*. Harriet was the eldest of six children, born in Wiltshire near Salisbury. Author Mary de Vere Taylor has read widely to produce the short but enlightening account. *Wiltshire Life* is published monthly by A&D Media. More at www.markallengroup.com/aandd.

THE BRITISH LIBRARY

The British Library has dipped a toe into the 21st century by allowing a pilot group of 40 readers to use their own cameras in the reading room. The BL is becoming more and more isolated in its refusal to allow readers to take their own images of the collection. The V & A Library has done so for many years - even offering a camera stand - and the National Archives allows the use of cameras once a reader has registered and signed a copyright agreement. In the experience of your editors using a digital camera to record manuscripts and fragile publications minimises both the time and the contact with the objects, aiding conservation rather than harming the artefacts. The digital images can then be transcribed, read, printed out or analysed at leisure. Permission to take images would allow the easy study of the texts of all Wilkie's plays, the manuscripts of some of his works and the small number of letters held by the BL. The pilot ended on 17 March and a report on the trial will be in the May Reader's Bulletin.

NEW WILKIE STUDY

Andrew Mangham, who organised the Wilkie Collins conference in Sheffield in 2005, has edited a new series of essays on the author which is due to be published shortly. *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays*

looks at Collins's journalism, plays and some of his lesser known and studied works such as *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Legacy of Cain*. It will also look at his work in the context of art, spiritualism, copyright, medicine and the law. A full review will appear in the Summer Newsletter. The book is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing price £34.99 ISBN 1-84718-109-0. More at <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/9781847181091>

***THE WOMAN IN WHITE* WEBSITE**

A website (slightly commercial) devoted solely to *The Woman in White* has been created by Stephen Bray at www.womaninwhite.info. On the site, which has been running for a little over a year, you will find details of the book itself with a plot summary and detailed analysis of all the main characters. Other pages relate to film and theatrical versions and the more recent musical. There are useful links to other sites but rather a lot of advertisements.

THE LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL

This year's festival is to be held from 29 June to 8 July. To request a free programme, telephone 0845 4581743 or visit <https://ledburypoetry.org.uk/>

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