



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2011

THE WILKIE COLLINS JOURNAL ON-LINE

We are very pleased to announce that a new series of *The Wilkie Collins Society Journal* will be commencing in 2012. Society member Andrew Mangham (University of Reading, UK) will be taking over from Graham Law and Lillian Nayder as general editor. There will be some significant changes to the format of the journal: the main one being that the publication will become an on-line publication. Society members will no longer be sent a paper copy of the journal but given a unique access code, which will provide access to an on-line, printable version. Members will also be able to read, print and search back issues. The other significant change to format will be the title, which will be *The Wilkie Collins Journal* from now on.

Tatiana Kontou (Oxford Brookes University, UK) will become the journal's reviews editor; both she and Dr Mangham are happy to answer enquiries and welcome article/review submissions of 6-8,000 words (MLA formatting). The journal has a new editorial board and will aim to continue as a peer-reviewed, quality journal dedicated to the life and works of Wilkie Collins and related authors. Thanks to funds from the Wilkie Collins Society, it has been possible to employ a professional web design company, which has done an excellent job in creating an attractive website. Society members may view a working prototype of the website at <http://acc.wilkiecollinssociety.org/>

Enquiries should be made to Dr Mangham in the first instance: a.s.mangham@reading.ac.uk.

We would like to take this opportunity of thanking once again our previous editors, Graham Law and Lillian Nayder. They both have immensely busy academic schedules but put in an enormous amount of work to sustain such a

high standard in the Second Series which ran for ten issues from 1996 to 2007. As mentioned above these will ultimately all be available on the Journal's website. In due course we hope to add articles from the long out of print First Series.

THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY WEBSITE

We have at the same time created a dedicated website for the society at www.wilkiecollinssociety.com. We have already created an archive of the Newsletters from the last fifteen years or so. There is an email contact form for members and prospective members and we shall now be able to add topical news items which arise in between printed Newsletters.

'THE DEVIL'S SPECTACLES'

'The Devil's Spectacles' (1879) is one of Collins's more obscure short stories which has recently been resurrected in *The Haunted Hotel & Other Stories* (Wordsworth Editions, 2006 ISBN I 84022 533 5). Wilkie would not have approved of this as together with two or three other tales it was written specifically for New York publication in *The Spirit of the Times*. He carefully stated "These stories have served their purpose in periodicals, but are not worthy of republication in book form. They were written in a hurry, and the sooner they are drowned in the waters of oblivion the better. I desire that they shall not be republished after my death."

Neil Handley, the alert curator of the British Optical Association Museum at the College of Optometrists, recently picked up on the optical title. He has written the following review which is interesting to read since it is from a non Collins perspective:

'At last I have read Wilkie Collins' famous short story 'The Devil's Spectacles'. It is a strange tale of an old-fashioned pair of spectacles that were supposedly given to a polar explorer by Satan himself as a reward for having descended to the basest moral level by eating the flesh of his companion who had perished in the snow. The spectacles allow the wearer to read the innermost thoughts of people, but this apparently useful property is not all it seems for they reveal all the faults of people, but none of their merits. The narrator, Alfred, is given the spectacles by the former explorer, Septimus Notman, on his deathbed when it is explained that they must be given to another person because if you throw the spectacles away they will come back to you and if you smash them up they will magically, and ominously, put themselves back together again. As Alfred and Septimus have never exactly got along one senses already that this gift is not

altogether an act of benevolence. The giver is 'Notman', not a man, because he has become inhuman.

'Alfred describes his new possession as being 'of the old-fashioned sort, with big circular glasses and stout tortoiseshell frames'. They smelled musty and needed to be thoroughly cleaned. Several times in the story he is described as taking them in and out of his pocket. The implication is that these are nose spectacles or folding eyeglasses rather than spectacles with sides, although this is not explicitly stated. When he puts them on, even though he moves in polite society, people feel obliged to comment upon their 'hideous ugliness'. Alfred lays the blame on 'my oculist', to which his mother responds 'I don't say your sight may not be failing; I only say change your oculist'. Interestingly it is known that Wilkie Collins' own eyesight was failing in this period.

'The Devil's Spectacles act as a medium to see through people's bodies, even to see the back view of someone's heart, but if Alfred was sceptical as to Notman's story before, the spectacles are now 'infernal' to him. A few uses later and he is glad to take them off, confiding in the reader that he had grown afraid of them and later still describing them as 'contaminating'. Alfred begins to realise that even when people tell lies there are sometimes higher and nobler motives that may cause this. If you read to the end of the story you'll discover how he manages to give the spectacles away and to which deserving character.

'This very odd story, seen as distinct from the author's usual output, was published in a number of periodicals in 1879, but with a rather abrupt ending that fails to satisfy and may be interpreted as a late attempt at a get-out. Collins subsequently refused to let the story appear in book form. In my opinion he was right to do so since quite apart from the slur on the standards of ophthalmic professionals and the damage this story may have done to the image of spectacle-wearers, it is a story as much about constrained social manners. In this sense it is typical of much of Collins' rather tedious output and, if nothing else, serves to make the story very dated in its appeal

'In a Vanity Fair caricature of Wilkie by Adriano Cecioni, published 3rd February 1872, he is shown seated on a chair and wearing oval-eye spectacles. Collins was a friend of Charles Dickens and is perhaps most famous as the author of 'The Woman in White' (1860) and 'The Moonstone' (1868). The National Portrait Gallery in London has two good portraits of him wearing spectacles, one by Sir John Everett Millais (1850) and the other by Rudolph Lehmann (1880). Blindness and other physical defects appear in several Collins novels, for example 'Poor Miss Finch' (1876) includes a description of a German oculist working in England and an operation to couch cataract. (See the

reference in *The Optician*, 14.12.1956). For an article by optometrist Andrew Gasson on the eyes of Wilkie Collins see *Ophthalmic Optician*, 8 May 1982 p.337.’

It is interesting that Neil picks up on the spectacles as a gift with a sting in the tail as this harks back to Herncastle’s gift of the cursed diamond in *The Moonstone*, written nine years before. The full review can be found at www.college-optometrists.org/en/knowledge-centre/museyeum/museumblog.cfm ; and ‘The Eyes of Wilkie Collins’ is at www.wilkie-collins.info/eyes_of_wilkie_collins.htm.

COLLINS DICKENS AND ART

The Spring issue of *The Dickensian* (No. 483 Vol. 107 Part 1) features a report of the Sixth Annual Watts Lecture of 6 March 2011. The lecture included references to Collins’s article ‘To Think or Be Thought For’ (*Household Words* 13 September 1856) in which he suggests that we should form our own opinions on art and not be governed by the cant of establishment criticism. It also tells us that Wilkie’s brother Charles Collins also wrote a series of articles on artistic subjects and reminds us both of his marriage to Dickens’s artist daughter Kate and Wilkie’s satirical treatment of Mr Fairlie *The Woman in White*.

***THE WOMAN IN WHITE* – A NEW ADAPTATION**

A new version of *The Woman in White* by Nicola Boyce was staged at the Cambridge Arts Theatre during the last week in July. The adaptation comes from the Ian Dickens Productions stable. There is a large cast which includes Colin Baker as Fosco, Peter Amory as Sir Percival Glyde, Neil Stacy as Mr Gilmore, Glyn Grain as Mr Fairlie, Isla Carter as Laura and Anne Catherick, Lucy Cudden as Marian Holcombe (sic) and Thomas Brownlee as Walter Hartright. The experienced members of the company give excellent and convincing performances although one or two of the characters perhaps resort to a little too much melodramatic ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’

The adaptation, by and large remarkably faithful to Collins’s novel, makes one realise quite how complex a plot he created for the original. It begins with Wilkie’s classic opening lines “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure and what a Man’s resolution can achieve.” The long first act of the almost three hour play sets the scene in great detail whereas Laura’s change of identity and the final denouement are rather rushed. Sir Percival’s demise in the burning church at Old Welmingham would have made a dramatic scene but was disappointingly omitted. The secret is revealed in the dialogue but might well leave an audience unfamiliar with the book rather confused. A nice homage to

the original is the use of multiple narrators. The main characters have monologues in the style of Collins so that “The story here presented will be told by more than one pen ... and by more than one witness.” Much of the dialogue is taken from the book although there are one or two strange alterations such as Laura’s inheritance changing from £20,000 to £30,000. As a final acknowledgement to the author, the lively musical background is mainly taken from Mozart, of whom Collins wrote “There is always comfort in Mozart... the King of all the music-composers that ever lived.”

Overall, this is a successful adaptation which is well worth seeing. It continues on tour in several provincial theatres with further performances up to the end of October in Swansea, Guildford, Buxton, Worthing, Derby, Basingstoke, Crew, Malvern and Taunton.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE ON RADIO 4 EXTRA

Listeners to Radio 4 Extra between 30 June and 5 July would have heard the repeat of a dramatisation of *The Woman in White* in four episodes. It was adapted for radio by Martin Wade and featured Toby Stevens as Walter Hartright, Juliet Aubrey as Marian, Emily Bruni as Laura, Edward Petherbridge as Mr Fairlie, Jeremy Clyde as Sir Percival and Phillip Voss as Fosco. The nice, moody musical score had been written by Elizabeth Parker.

The adaptation was originally heard in March 1998. Radio 4 Extra have a penchant for repeats so it may well reappear in due course. The recording is, however, available on CD as part of the BBC Radio Collection.

THE ROAD HILL HOUSE MURDER

The Stafford Gatehouse Theatre will present *The Road Hill House Murder* from 9-12 November. Quoting from the theatre’s introduction: “Based on real events in the village of Road (now called Rode) in Wiltshire in 1860, this drama tells of the attempts of one of Scotland Yard’s first ever detectives to solve a particularly grisly murder, one which shocked the whole nation. Whicher’s single-minded pursuit of the one he believed guilty in spite of public opposition and ridicule led to a mental breakdown and premature retirement from the force. But was he right?” The case has recently had revived publicity with the best seller by Kate Summerscale, “The Suspicions of Mr Whicher.”

The clue of a stained missing night dress was subsequently used in 1868 by Collins in *The Moonstone* where Franklin Blake’s nightgown is hidden by the servant, Rosanna Spearman. Further details are available at staffordgatehousetheatre.co.uk/whats-on/amateur-dramatics/Road-Hill-House.

AT THE CIRCULATING LIBRARY

The bibliographical website, 'At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901', was originally founded in 2007. It was created by Troy J. Bassett, assistant professor of English and Linguistics at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, to provide biographical and bibliographical data about the countless authors, publishers, and novels of the Victorian period. It was inspired by and continues the work of the two bibliographical websites *British Fiction 1800-1829* and *The English Novel, 1830-36*. As of October 2010, the site claims that the database accounts for all of the two-, three- and four-volume novels published during the Victorian period. Further author and serialization details are currently being added.

The Collins entry now records 26 titles, each of which gives brief bibliographical details. These include links where appropriate to the journals or Newspapers in which the novels were serialised which in turn list chronologically other fictional material. There is a page with a useful list of periodicals and interesting sets of statistics. Currently the database contains 7335 titles, 2494 author entries, and 225 publishers. Wilkie doesn't make it into either the Most Prolific – headed by Margaret Oliphant with 71 titles – or the Most Prolific Serial Authors – headed by Mary Braddon with 47 titles. He was, however, published in eight of the fifteen Most Prolific Periodicals – headed by *The Manchester Weekly Times* with 77 titles, one of which was *Heart and Science*. *All the Year Round* came a close second with 76, including, of course, *The Woman in White* and *No Name*.

WILKIE COLLINS, VERA CASPARY AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE CASEBOOK NOVEL

A new book examines Collins's use of documents in his books and claims that Vera Caspary, a 20th century writer of thrillers and film noir stories, made extensive use of his plots. In *Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel*, Professor A. B. Emrys of the University of Nebraska-Kearney claims that Caspary (1899-1987) was inspired to write thrillers by reading *The Woman in White* and made use of its structure and plot three times in her career. This included her most famous novel *Laura*. The first half of the book sets out Emrys's analysis of Collins's work. The second makes the links with Caspary. ISBN 978-0-7864-4786-2 Macfarland & Co., Jefferson and London 2011.

THE SWEDISH BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lars-Erik Nygren, who created a Swedish bibliography of Collins titles, has now prepared an update as a result of further research. The illustrated original

identified nearly 200 Swedish editions and *Wilkie Collins på svenska – en bibliografi* can still be obtained from the author price SEK160, £13.50 or €16.50. You can pay by PayPal – contact lars-erik.nygren@comhem.se for details.

WILKIE IN THE NEW YORKER

[Melisa Klimaszewski](#)'s recent biography of Collins in the Hesperus Press Brief Lives series prompted an excellent review of both the book and Wilkie's life in the *New Yorker* for 25 July. The article was written by Jonathan Rosen with the title 'Doubles: Wilkie Collins's shadow selves'. Although concentrating on *The Woman in White* the four and a bit pages neatly encapsulate both Wilkie's life and works, a sort of brief resume of a brief life. It credits Wilkie with the creation of the sensation novel "a wildly popular Victorian genre that blended gothic horror and domestic realism—and the latter is often credited with spawning the modern detective story, that's not a bad legacy." Collins is not regarded as a protégé of Dickens but awarded equal status and we Wilkie fans are "more cultic than mainstream." The article also features a rather splendid and novel caricature of Wilkie. It is pay for access but can be read online at archives.newyorker.com/?i=2011-07-25#folio=075.

MORE WILKIE IN NEW YORK

The Morgan Library in New York has three pencil sketches by Wilkie Collins. One of them was featured in an article in the Huffington Post recently, written by the Library's manuscripts cataloguer Carolyn Vega. The picture illustrated in the piece is noted as being the Church of San Nicolas in Granada Spain though Carolyn Vega says she cannot identify that church or any other images of it. The other two drawings, which she does not mention, are labelled 'A Tower and A River April 1841' and 'A Country Scene'. At this time Collins was still considering a career as an artist and his painting *The Smuggler's Retreat* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1849, item 38 although positioned high up in the Octagon Room it would have been hard to see. The same folder at the Morgan also contains two photographic portraits of Collins, the 1861 Cundall & Downes taken in London; and one of the series taken by Sarony of New York, posed for during Wilkie's reading tour of America during 1873-4. Full details of the article can be found at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-vega/photographing-wilkie-collins_b_906742.html

WILKIE COLLINS AND VERA CASPARY

Published in April is Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel by A. B. Emrys. The main theme shows how Vera Caspary

(1899-1987), well known in her time for crime novels and film scripts, drew on Collins use of multiple narrators and documents to influence her own work. Her best known book is *Laura* which also became a successful film and play. The six chapters on Collins “define recognizable characteristics of the novel of testimony in three novels by Collins, *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone* and *The Legacy of Cain*, his final completed novel.” The introduction continues with “Her fiction is a direct explicit link between sensation and noir through her close reading of Wilkie Collins, whose characters she found so compatible as to adapt them and whose polyphonic structure she applied in many of her works beyond *Laura*..... She utilized witnessing statements and confessions across the same wide range as Collins, including narratives partially told in documents...” The study is published by McFarland & Co Inc of Jefferson, North Carolina; the UK price is about £30 but discounted at The Book Depository and Amazon; ISBN 978-0-7864-4786-2.

WILKIE THE TAPHEPHOBE

Wilkie makes a brief entry in Bill Bryson’s recent book, *At Home*. In his chapter on ‘The Bedroom’ he discusses the Victorian fear of premature burial. “So many people became morbidly obsessed with the fear of being interred before their time that a word was coined for it: *taphophobia*. The novelist Wilkie Collins placed on his bedside table each night a letter bearing standing instructions of the tests he wished carried out to ensure that he really had died in his sleep if he was found in seemingly corpse-like state.” Bryson gives no source for this perhaps apocryphal story which doesn’t feature in *The Public Face* collected letters. It is, however, mentioned by our new Journal editor Andrew Mangham in his essay ‘Buried Alive: The Gothic Awakening of Taphephobia’ (*Journal of Literature and Science*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2010). Here he quotes the source as the late Chris Willis ‘A House for the Dead: Victorian Mausolea and Graveyard Gothic’ (*Victorian Gothic: Leeds Centre Working Papers in Victorian Studies* 6 (2003): 155-65).

Collins had explored the theme of being buried alive first in his play *The Red Vial* (1858) and secondly when this was rewritten as the novel *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1880). Both culminate in a dramatic scene in the Hamburg deadhouse where Mrs Wagner recovers from a deathlike coma, ringing an alarm bell attached to her foot which in turns alerts the watchman.