



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

WILKIE COLLINS, SPORT AND EXERCISE

Compiled by

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“The worst curse of human life is the detestable necessity of taking exercise.” *I Say No*

With the Olympics, Paralympics and a summer of sport still in our minds, here is a selection of Wilkie’s thoughts on exercise and sports as described in both his fiction and his letters.

ON EXERCISE IN GENERAL

Despite the above quotation and the anti-athletic views in some of his novels, Collins throughout most of his life seems to accept the need for and sometimes even likes the idea of exercise. Thus in 1852 he writes to his best friend, Charles Ward, “In bed at 1/2 past 10 - up at 7 - ten mile walk every day - What do you think of that for W.W.C., of late-hours-and-no-exercise-notoriety? I am in a state of the rudest health and hardest fat, already!” (PF 16 September 1852). And in 1857, soon after his accident while climbing Carrock Fell, “My sprained ankle [sic] has prevented me from taking exercise, and want of exercise has ended in the return of some of my old bilious miseries” (PF 11 October 1857). This is followed by “I have always been accustomed to plenty of exercise, and the enforced cessation of all bodily activity has sadly affected my health and spirits.” (PF December 1857). Even twenty years later he writes “When this work is done, the exercise begins – or there is no health for me” (PF 11 January 1879).

In his later years he can still look on exercise as a desirable thing: “After working hard, I had gone out to get a natural Turkish Bath by the nearest approach to brisk exercise that I can accomplish.” (31 March 1882); and “Forgive me if I begin and end in these few dull lines. I have a merciless enemy who has been trying to kill me for years past, and whose name is Gout. I am still a prisoner in my room – so weakened by the terrible remedies employed that I cannot write for long together. Air and exercise are the two luxuries that I have to enjoy in a few days more.” (PF 17 February 1883); although later on “The doctor hunts me with unlimited directions relating to exercise and fresh air.” (PF 29 October 1885).

“On every fairly fine day I am obliged to get what air and exercise I can before sundown” (PF 11 December 1886). In the following year, he advises Harry Quilter “Don’t work! In that state of your head, it is a risk, and you will not do yourself justice. If the cause is congestion – exercise and perspiration are the remedies – a walk, a bath, a rub-down. But if nerves are to blame – I dare not advise. In the matter of nerves, every man is a law unto himself. (PF 7 April 1887).

In relation to work, Collins writes “With my habits it is terrible work writing, without my customary exercise.” (PF 28 December 1887); and the following year “I was driven out by the Doctor [Frank Beard]. The strain of my work, this time, still makes itself felt after the work is done – and the remedies are air and (moderate) exercise. To be followed by the sea, I suppose, when I can stand the infernal noise and vibration of railway travelling.” (PF 6 June 1888). But as his health declines more seriously, Collins describes the “revolt of the liver as the consequence of want of exercise” (PF 5 October 1888) and shortly after “You have done well to leave London. For the last four days, choking fogs and bone-shivering damps. To day I have got out for the first time since last week – and today my wretched nerves are the better from a little exercise” (PF 1 January 1889). The last reference is shortly before his fatal stroke in June “When the pen is laid down, enter the doctor: “Go out! Why are you not getting air and exercise.” He is quite right about air and exercise, and out I go. In a wholesome state of fatigue, I return...” (PF 20 May 1889).

TAKING THE AIR

When his health is poor, Collins seems to regard 'taking the air' as a reasonable substitute for exercise. Thus by the 1860s he writes to William Frith "By slow, slow degrees I am getting better. I can manage a ride in a carriage, with my miserable feet propped up on the front seat. As soon as these said feet will bear a little more exertion, I hope they will carry me into your studio." (PF 3 March 1863); and to Gregson, his dentist, "Between the necessity of working, the necessity of resting, and the necessity of getting a certain daily dose of fresh air in a carriage – I have literally not had half an hour to spare since I last had the pleasure of seeing you." (PF 8 July 1868). On 1 June 1877 he writes two letters: "I am just getting well enough to be helped into a carriage to take the air – and when I am brought home again, I am so weak that I generally fall asleep."; and "I have but a poor report to send you of myself. The miserable English spring of this year has been marked (in my calendar) by another attack of rheumatic gout. I am only now able to get into a carriage with help, and to take the air in that way as a means of restoring my strength.". However, the air loses its attractions by the 1880s when "I am told to "drive out" - but I won't. An "airing in a carriage" is (to me) such a depressing proceeding that I am ready to burst out crying when I only think of it." (PF 22 June 1881).

THE TWO 'R'S – RUNNING AND ROWING

It is unlikely that Collins ever indulged in running although he does record in a letter to his mother from the coast at Southsea "rowing in the "dingy" till my arms are almost off whenever the weather permits" (PF 1841-43).

Describing Zack in *Hide and Seeks*, Collins seems to admire that

"His boxing, rowing, and other athletic exercises had done wonders towards bringing his naturally vigorous, upright frame to the perfection of healthy muscular condition. Tall and strong as he was, there was nothing stiff or ungainly in his movements, he trod easily and lightly, with a certain youthful suppleness and hardy grace in all his actions, which set off his fine bodily formation to the best advantage."

Despite admitting his own needs for exercise, Collins reserved his main criticism for the prevailing cult of athleticism for *Man and Wife* (1870). Here Sir Patrick Lundy asks

"Will the skill in rowing, the swiftness in running, the admirable capacity and endurance in other physical exercises, which he [Geoffrey Delamayn] has attained, by a strenuous cultivation in this kind that has excluded any similarly strenuous cultivation in other kinds - will these physical attainments help him to win a purely moral victory over his own selfishness and his own cruelty? They won't even help him to see that it is selfishness, and that it is cruelty. The essential principle of his rowing and racing (a harmless principle enough, if you can be sure of applying it to rowing and racing only) has taught him to take every advantage of another man that his superior strength and superior cunning can suggest."

Mr Speedwell, the surgeon, subsequently confronts Delamayn with

"There is a Physical objection to the present rage for muscular exercises of all sorts, which is quite as strong, in its way, as the Moral objection. You have stated the consequences as they may affect the mind. I can state the consequences as they do affect the body [...] From my own experience. I can tell you, as a medical man, that a proportion, and not by any means a small one, of the young men who are now putting themselves to violent athletic tests of their strength and endurance, are taking that course to the serious and permanent injury of their own health. The public who attend rowing-matches, foot-races, and other exhibitions of that sort, see nothing but the successful results of muscular training. Fathers and mothers at home see the failures. There are households in England - miserable households, to be counted, Sir Patrick, by more than ones and twos - in which there are young men who have to thank the strain laid on their constitutions by the popular physical displays of the present time, for being broken men, and invalided men, for the rest of their lives."

Mr Speedwell is vindicated with Delamayn's ultimate collapse at the end of the foot-race when

"Delamayn swerved on the path. His trainer dashed water over him. He rallied, and ran another step or two - swerved again - staggered - lifted his arm to his mouth with a hoarse cry of rage - fastened his own teeth in his flesh like a wild beast - and fell senseless on the course. [...] There the conquered athlete lay: outwardly an inert mass of strength, formidable to look at, even in its fall; inwardly, a weaker creature, in all that constitutes vital force, than the fly that buzzed on the window-pane."

As Speedwell subsequently comments,

"Hereditary paralysis might have found him out thirty years hence. His rowing and his running, for the last four years, are alone answerable for what has happened to-day. [...] Delamayn is far from being the first man who has dropped at foot-racing, under the cruel stress laid on the vital organs."

Delamayn's demise was written after Collins's usual careful research. He had written to Joseph Parkinson, a journalist and social reformer, "

1. What is the average length of time occupied in training for a boat-race? Also, for running races, and leaping races?

2. In these two latter cases - the running and the leaping - does the University student in Athletics come into contact with a low order of man acting as trainer or instructor? In this matter of rowing, I understand him to be trained and instructed by his equals in the university. Is this the case with other athletic accomplishments? In other words, does physical education, in any of its branches, lead to degrading social associations, by necessitating a low order of professional instructor?

3. If I suppose a young man of three or four and twenty to have trained for the university boat-race - to have also trained (later in the same year) for athletic sports - and to be in course of training (for the third time) for the next year's anniversary boat-race - would such excess of training be amply sufficient to account for his breaking down, and dying, under the effects of the third in this series of trainings? Again, would this be an exaggerated case to take? and would a smaller number of trainings be sufficient to justify the break-down?

4. Can you furnish me with any slang expressions of the Muscular School (like the "three belts of muscle", for instance) which would be likely to be spoken, at a country house, in a mixed assembly of Ladies and Gentlemen?" (PF 17 July 1869).

WALKING

In his youth, walking was probably Collins's main physical activity. This was exemplified in *Rambles Beyond Railways*, his walking tour of Cornwall in 1850, the route of which covered 234 miles. At the beginning of this "pedestrian tour" he writes

"I exhort you, that first and oldest-established of all conveyances, your own legs!" and "you may physic yourself by Nature's own simple prescription, walking in fresh air."

In the third chapter he continues

"Again and uncompromisingly I say it, therefore walk, and be merry; walk, and be healthy; walk, and be your own master ! - walk, to enjoy, to observe, to improve, as no riders can ! - walk, and you are the best peripatetic impersonation of genuine holiday enjoyment that is to be met with on the surface of this work-a-day world!"

In 1855 he writes to his best friend, Charles Ward, from Folkestone "We have just been out for a walk and have been driven back wet through by a squall rather before our usual time of returning

[...] I am, in real truth, at work (beginning a new speculation) in the morning - In the afternoon we are taking prodigious walks and climbing inaccessible places” (PF 20 August 1855).

Collins’s walking career probably came to an end after his journey to the Lake District with Dickens when he badly sprained his ankle after a reluctant ascent of Carrock Fell in the mist. Collins was quite content to rest in the front room of the Ship Inn at Allonby while the energetic Dickens as described in ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’ (1857) was out walking.

“While Francis Goodchild [Dickens] was wandering hither and thither, storing his mind with perpetual observation of men and things, and sincerely believing himself to be the laziest creature in existence all the time—how did Thomas Idle [Collins], crippled and confined to the house, contrive to get through the hours of the day? Prone on the sofa, Thomas made no attempt to get through the hours, but passively allowed the hours to get through *him*. Where other men in his situation would have read books and improved their minds, Thomas slept and rested his body.”

SKATING

Skating was occasionally one of Wilkie’s youthful entertainments. He writes to Holman Hunt “I hear you took up the noble art of skating, last frost. If there is any more ice this winter, let us meet, and tumble in company. The whole secret of skating consists in not being afraid of perpetual sprawling at full length. When Charley and I learnt, as lads, we had a bottle of “opodeldoc” – stripped after a morning’s practise [sic] – and anointed each others’ bruises by the fireside. Thirty tumbles apiece, was our morning’s average, in learning the “outside edge” and “the three”!. (PF 2 February 1861). However, a few years later he reassures his mother “You will see in your newspaper tomorrow morning an account of a terrible accident on the ice in the Regent’s Park. Here is a line to tell you that I have not had any time for skating – and shall not have any time for skating. Also, that Charley is equally busy – and that he told me, the last time I saw him, that he thought himself too old for skating. So don’t be afraid that your sons – whatever else may happen to them – will tumble through the ice and be drowned. (PF 15 January 1867)

Skating is by and large absent from the novels, except in *The New Magdalen* where

“It is a glorious winter's day. The sky is clear, the frost is hard, the ice bears for skating.” and “The ladies in their rich winter dresses, the smart nursery maids, the lovely children, the ever moving crowd skating on the ice of the Round Pond; it was all so exhilarating.”

RIDING AND HUNTING

Riding was another youthful Collins activity. In the early 1840s he writes to his mother “Tell Charlie I am riding upon a splendid black mare ... as fast as the wind yet withal as gentle as a lamb.” (PF 1841-43); but ten years later during one of his bouts of illness “Half an hour’s walking or riding is as much as I can safely manage.” (PF 14 March 1855).

The eponymous hero of *Basil* (1852) admits

“I have contracted a bad habit of writing at night - I read almost incessantly in the day time. It is only because I am fond of riding, that I am ever willing to interrupt my studies, and ever ready to go out at all.”

Allan Armadale states

“I don't like your leaving me in this sudden manner. There's something so strange and dreary about it. Why not try riding, if you want more exercise; all the horses in the stables are at your disposal.” (*Armadale* 1866).

In *The Woman in White* (1860), Marian Halcombe records that

“Sir Percival cared for no exercise but riding, and the Count (except when he was polite enough to be my escort) cared for no exercise at all.”

Riding is an integral part of the plot of ‘Miss Mina and the Groom’ (1878) where the heroine says

“Out of the house, my one diversion, always welcome and always fresh, was riding.” and the General, before his accident, “was noted as one of the most daring and most accomplished riders in our county. He had always delighted in riding young and high-spirited horses; and the habit remained with him after he had quitted the active duties of his profession in later life.”

In ‘The Dream Woman’ (1855) Percy Fairbank narrates that

“We delight in riding, and we enjoy the breezy spring morning and the fair and fertile English landscape surrounding us on every side. While the hunt prospers, we follow the hunt. But when a check occurs - when time passes and patience is sorely tried; when the bewildered dogs run hither and thither, and strong language falls from the lips of exasperated sportsmen - we fail to take any further interest in the proceedings. We turn our horses' heads in the direction of a grassy lane, delightfully shaded by trees. We trot merrily along the lane, and find ourselves on an open common. We gallop across the common, and follow the windings of a second lane. We cross a brook, we pass through a village, we emerge into pastoral solitude among the hills. The horses toss their heads, and neigh to each other, and enjoy it as much as we do.”

Allan Armadale’s opinion of hunting is rather more critical when he states “I could enjoy a ride on horseback without galloping after a wretched stinking fox or a distracted little hare.”

SAILING

Sailing became one of Collins's main outdoor recreations. His regular sailing companions were Edward Pigott, Henry Bullar and Charles Ward. Both Collins and his doctor were convinced that the sea breezes were good for his health. Collins's first major trips were with Pigott to the Scilly Isles in 1855 and Cherbourg in 1856. He sailed from Broadstairs in 1858 and the early 1860s, and from Great Yarmouth in 1864. In his later years, he sailed off Ramsgate during the 1870s.

Collins was himself a good sailor although he has the inebriated Zack in *Hide and Seek* (1854) produce

“sounds nautically and lamentably associated with white basins, whirling waves, and misery of mortal stomachs wailing in emetic despair.”

Sailing featured in several other stories, including 'The Cruise of the Tomtit' (1855), 'A Plot in Private Life' (1858), *Armadale* (1866), and 'Miss or Mrs?' (1871).

COLLINS AND CRICKET

It is unlikely that Wilkie ever played cricket himself but in *Basil* (1852), Ralph “then, at college, became illustrious among rowers and cricketers.” Frank Softly in *A Rogue’s Life* (1856) describes how he “learned to play at cricket”; whilst in *The Dead Secret* (1857)

“Doctor Chennery was, in a physical point of view, a credit to the Establishment to which he was attached. He stood six feet two in his shooting-shoes; he weighed fifteen stone; he was the best bowler in the Long Beckley cricket-club.”

There is a brief mention in 'A Shockingly Rude Article' (1858): "I married a man the other day for the third time. Man in my parish. Capital cricketer when he was young enough to run." Mr. Ronald in *The Fallen Leaves* (1879) seemed less fortunate:

"His mind began to wander strangely; he was not angry or frightened or distressed. Instead of thinking of what had just happened, he was thinking of his young days when he had been a cricket-player. One special game revived in his memory, at which he had been struck on the head by the ball. "Just the same feeling," he reflected vacantly, with his hat off, and his hand on his forehead. "Dazed and giddy - just the same feeling!"

But for the longest and most humorous description, we have to remember Thomas Idle, the persona adopted by Wilkie in 'The Lazy tour of Two Idle Apprentices'.

"So, again, with the second disaster. While Thomas was lazy, he was a model of health. His first attempt at active exertion and his first suffering from severe illness are connected together by the intimate relations of cause and effect. Shortly after leaving school, he accompanied a party of friends to a cricket-field, in his natural and appropriate character of spectator only. On the ground it was discovered that the players fell short of the required number, and facile Thomas was persuaded to assist in making up the complement. At a certain appointed time, he was roused from peaceful slumber in a dry ditch, and placed before three wickets with a bat in his hand. Opposite to him, behind three more wickets, stood one of his bosom friends, filling the situation (as he was informed) of bowler. No words can describe Mr. Idle's horror and amazement, when he saw this young man – on ordinary occasions, the meekest and mildest of human beings - suddenly contract his eye-brows, compress his lips, assume the aspect of an infuriated savage, run back a few steps, then run forward, and, without the slightest previous provocation, hurl a detestably hard ball with all his might straight at Thomas's legs. Stimulated to preternatural activity of body and sharpness of eye by the instinct of self-preservation, Mr. Idle contrived, by jumping deftly aside at the right moment, and by using his bat (ridiculously narrow as it was for the purpose) as a shield, to preserve his life and limbs from the dastardly attack that had been made on both, to leave the full force of the deadly missile to strike his wicket instead of his leg; and to end the Innings, so far as his side was concerned, by being immediately bowled out. Grateful for his escape, he was about to return to the dry ditch, when he was peremptorily stopped, and told that the other side was 'going in,' and that he was expected to 'field.' His conception of the whole art and mystery of 'fielding,' may be summed up in the three words of serious advice which he privately administered to himself on that trying occasion - avoid the ball. Fortified by this sound and salutary principle, he took his own course, impervious alike to ridicule and abuse. Whenever the ball came near him, he thought of his shins, and got out of the way immediately. 'Catch it!' 'Stop it!' 'Pitch it up!' were cries that passed by him like the idle wind that he regarded not. He ducked under it, he jumped over it, he whisked himself away from it on either side. Never once, through the whole innings did he and the ball come together on anything approaching to intimate terms. The unnatural activity of body which was necessarily called forth for the accomplishment of this result threw Thomas Idle, for the first time in his life, into a perspiration. The perspiration, in consequence of his want of practice in the management of that particular result of bodily activity, was suddenly checked; the inevitable chill succeeded; and that, in its turn, was followed by a fever. For the first time since his birth, Mr. Idle found himself confined to his bed for many weeks together, wasted and worn by a long illness, of which his own disastrous muscular exertion had been the sole first cause."

CONCLUSION

The only Olympic in Collins's time was the Olympic Theatre in Wych Street where the Aldwych now is. Here were staged several of his plays including *The Woman in White* (1871-72) and *The Moonstone* (1877). However, for the Paralympics, Miserrimus Dexter from *The Law and the Lady* (1875) would make a very likely medals candidate when

"He was off on his furious wheels - half man, half chair - flying like a whirlwind to the other end of the room. Even this exercise was not violent enough for him in his present mood. In an instant he was down on the floor, poised on his hands, and looking in the distance like a monstrous frog. Hopping down the room, he overthrew, one after another, all the smaller and lighter chairs as he passed them; arrived at the end, he turned, surveyed the prostrate chairs, encouraged himself with a scream of triumph, and leaped rapidly over chair after chair on his hands - his limbless body now thrown back from the shoulders, and now thrown forward to keep the balance - in a manner at once wonderful and horrible to behold. "Dexter's Leap-frog!" he cried, cheerfully, perching himself with his birdlike lightness on the last of the prostrate chairs when he had reached the further end of the room. "I'm pretty active, Mrs. Valeria, considering I'm a cripple."

It is often assumed that because of his fierce attack on athleticism in *Man and Wife*, Collins was against all forms of exercise. It seems, however, that throughout most of his life he recognised its need and even enjoyed various forms of physical activity in his youth. With the infirmities of age it became a tedious necessity for which taking the air became the best substitute. Perhaps we can do no better than conclude with Hartright's description of Professor Pesca in *The Woman in White*:

"Finding us distinguished, as a nation, by our love of athletic exercises, the little man, in the innocence of his heart, devoted himself impromptu to all our English sports and pastimes whenever he had the opportunity of joining them; firmly persuaded that he could adopt our national amusements of the field by an effort of will precisely as he had adopted our national gaiters and our national white hat."

NOTES

The PF dates refer to *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* (Pickering & Chatto, London 2005, Baker, W., Gasson, A., Law, G., and Lewis, P.) where most of the references are annotated in full.

The quotations from Collins's works may be found from searching the etexts on James Rusk's pages at <http://www.digitalpixels.org/jr/wc/>.

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