



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2012

PETER ACKROYD'S *WILKIE COLLINS*

I have been critical of Peter Ackroyd in the past - his *Dickens* is magisterial but annoyingly lacking in footnotes. But I warmed to this short biography of Wilkie from the first page where he begins with a charming description of “perhaps the sweetest-tempered of all the Victorian novelists.” (p2)

Of course the lack of footnotes in this book annoyed me too. There were points I wanted to track down and check. For example, Ackroyd says Wilkie “liked to ride on the omnibus because he wished to immerse himself in what he called ‘the Actual’, as opposed to ‘the Ideal’.” (p3) I thought as an adult he rode in cabs or walked only using the omnibus as a boy to go to school. Was he “used to bickering with waiters and cab drivers” (p7) due to his well known parsimony? Did he really quarrel with his servants so that two left him? (p10). And did he wear “pink shirts” (p160) and “a light camel hair” suit to dinner (p2)?

But the more I read of the book the more these minor scholarly quibbles faded to background detail. Ackroyd clearly admired Wilkie’s storytelling and descriptive powers as much if not more than any of his other biographers. Even *Antonina*, dismissed by many, is praised by Ackroyd as “crafted brilliantly by a young author already equipped with great technical powers”. (p41). *Hide and Seek* is “an extremely well-manufactured device, with an intricate mechanism at its centre.” (p60). On *The Woman in White* “One reviewer described him as ‘a machinist’; if he was, he was a machinist of genius.” (p.88). And of *I Say No* “a

compelling and almost irresistible narrative... a novel of pure suspense in which... people are linked by a deadly secret which only they can unravel. No-one could plot this more finely than Collins” (pi 74). The only novel he does not summarise is *Armadale* because “the plot is too detailed to be amenable to precis. You cannot turn a labyrinth into a straight path.” (pl 15)

Of course, using what we might *homage* as the ‘*méthode Ackroydois*’ (reading everything by the author then everything about the author then writing the biography from beginning to end) the book does repeat errors in other biographies. Though interestingly Ackroyd takes as read that Wilkie met Martha when she was his mother’s servant rather than through a chance meeting on a trip to Norfolk (pp127-128).

Ackroyd also dismisses the common complaint that later in life Wilkie wrote poorer novels because he tried to make socio-political points. Rather, says Ackroyd, Collins confines his ‘vision’ to the prefaces to his work and “never allows any ‘message’ to override the imperatives of plot, while his dislike of such practices as vivisection lends power and purpose to his prose” (p.146). Ackroyd appreciates his humour too. He quotes *Blind Love* where “a landlady provides food ‘cooked to a degree of imperfection only attained in an English kitchen’” (pl25).

The book is largely chronological and students of Collins will of course find the tale familiar. But seldom has it been written with such ease and grace, such admiration and power.

Ackroyd repeats with relish the words Collins gives to Fosco “One of the rarest of all the intellectual accomplishments that a man can possess is the grand faculty of arranging his ideas. Immense privilege! I possess it. Do you?” Collins of course did. Ackroyd certainly does. And that may lie at the heart of his admiration of Wilkie - that and the fact they can both be described as ‘the least *posé* public man I have ever met’ (p2).

Peter Ackroyd *Wilkie Collins*, Chatto & Windus, London 2012 ISBN 978-0-701-16990-9, £12.99, but widely discounted.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

Louise Taylor of Brighton's Jubilee Library has created a ghostly life-size depiction in wire and textile of Anne Catherick for an exhibition in the Library of 'Desert Island Books'. These are depictions by staff of their favourite paperback books. The exhibition runs for the Brighton Festival from 5 - 26 May. You can see an image on the front page [of www.wilkiecollins.com](http://www.wilkiecollins.com).

EROTIC DREAMS

Jacky Tarleton is a WCS member who runs the Wilkie Collins Appreciation Society on Facebook www.facebook.com/groups/2228650086. Jacky is also a published poet and PhD student at the University of Exeter. She responded to a discussion in *The Guardian* of the ten best erotic dreams in literature. Her letter was published in *The Guardian* on 16 February and is reproduced here with Jacky's permission:-

'May I suggest an erotic dream which occurs in Wilkie Collins's 1852 novel, "Basil", when the eponymous hero dreams of the very young woman he saw on the omnibus thus:

"The woman from the woods clasped me more closely than before, pressing her warm lips on mine; and it was as if her long hair fell round us both, spreading over my eyes like a veil ... I was drawn along in the arms of the dark woman, with my blood burning and my breath failing me, until we entered the secret recesses that lay within the unfathomable depths of trees. There, she encircled me in the folds of her dusky robe, and laid her cheek close to mine ... I had given myself up, heart, and soul, and body, to the woman from the dark woods" (from chapter 8).

His never-to-be consummated love for this woman leads to appalling disaster, recounted in 344 pages of gripping detail. I think this is the most fascinating of Wilkie Collins's novels.'

NO NAME

One hundred and fifty years ago Wilkie's novel *No Name* was being serialised in *All The Year Round*. It ran from 15 March 1862 through to 17 January 1863. You can follow it week by week using the excellent Dickens Journals Online

www.djo.org.uk run by John Drew at the University of Buckingham. It reproduces the whole periodical with images of the original pages and a transcript. You can start with the first part here <https://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-vii/page-1.html>

No Name was Wilkie's next novel after the phenomenal success of *The Woman in White*. On 24 May 1862 he wrote to his mother "I am slowly – very slowly – building up the scaffolding of the new book". The title though eluded him until the book was partly set up in type. On 27 January 1862 he wrote to the sub-editor W. H. Wills "Dickens sends several titles – some very good – but I hardly think the title has been found yet." Wilkie wrote again to his mother on 4 February 1862 saying "But the title – the terrible title – is not decided on yet! It must be settled tomorrow." In fact, as Virginia Blain shows in 'The Naming of *No Name*' (*WCSJ* 4 (1984) pp. 25-30), the title came to him even later than that. And Collins went through the manuscript adding references to the fact that Magdalen Vanstone had 'no name'.

THE FROZEN DEEP AND THE LIGHTHOUSE IN THE DICKENSIAN

The latest Bicentenary edition of *The Dickensian* for Spring 2012 (No. 486, Vol. 108, Part 1) features 'Selection Guide to Dickens's Amateur Theatricals – Part 2' by Robert C. Hanna. The essay gives a short resume of the plot, the playwright, Dickens's role, the locations and dates of performances and the type of performance. Collins is represented by *The Frozen Deep* (1857) and *The Lighthouse* (1855) and there is a reproduction of the dramatic scenery backdrop painted by Clarkson Stanfield. There are also details of Bulwer-Lytton's *Not So Bad as We Seem*. Wilkie was invited by Dickens to act in this play, first performed on 16 May 1851, and occasioned their first meeting.

The same issue of *The Dickensian* also includes several reviews of books published to coincide with the bicentenary, including Claire Tomalin's *Charles Dickens: A Life* (Viking ISBN 978-0670-91767-9).

JOURNALS ONLINE

There is also a notice in the current issue that the full archive of *The Dickensian* from 1905 -2000 is becoming available from Proquest's *Periodical Archive*

Online (PAO) and the years 2001 onwards will be published on Proquest's *Literature Online* (LION). Complimentary access is available to individual subscribers to *The Dickensian*.

The Guardian of 15 April records that the archives of *The Illustrated London News* are also now accessible online from 1842-2003, at this stage for libraries and educational institutions. The statistics are impressive with 250,000 pages and three-quarters of a million illustrations. At its peak, it had a circulation of 300,000. Apart from 'My Lady's Money' in the Christmas 1877 issue and the 1889 serialisation of *Blind Love*, there should be plenty of Collins material since there were regular reviews of his books and theatre productions.

FORTHCOMING FILMS

There are two forthcoming films with a Collins connection. The first is an adaptation of Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman*. The story will revolve around Wilkie's play, *The Frozen Deep* and is being directed by Ralph Fiennes who will star as Dickens. Felicity Jones will play Nelly Teman, Kristin Scott Thomas Nelly's mother and Tom Hollander will feature as Wilkie. The adaptation is by Abi Morgan and according to the official synopsis "Nelly, a happily malTied mother and school teacher, is haunted by her past. Her memories take us back in time to follow the story of her relationship with Charles Dickens with whom she discovered an exciting but fragile complicity." See <https://wegotthiscovered.com/movies/ralph-fiennes-felicity-jones-charles-dickens-film-the-invisible-woman/>

The second film concerns the life of the popular composer and pianist Francesco Berger (1834-1933). Berger had his first opera performed in Trieste at the age of seventeen. On his return to London he became a member of Dickens's amateur theatrical company and wrote the music for both *The Frozen Deep* and *The Lighthouse*.

FICTION ABOUT A FICTIONAL MANUSCRIPT

A long lost Wilkie Collins manuscript appears in the recently published crime novel *Cloudland* by Joseph Olshan (Minotaur Books, New York, ISBN 978-1-250-00017-0, available from the Book Depository). In this decided work of

fiction, a serial killer follows the plot of *The Widower's Branch* where the dead bodies of married women are found near fallen trees. Allegedly "*The Widower's Branch* is actually the very last novel Wilkie Collins ever wrote written after *Blind Love* which many scholars advance as the author's last workand never tampered with by anybody; it was left by his literary executors a fragment, a mere eighty pages with a detailed outline published posthumously in an extremely limited edition."

Pure fiction, of course, since Collins's real lost novel *Iolani* was the first he wrote in 1844 and actually published in an unlimited edition in 1998. Interestingly enough, the notion of a Collins manuscript has been used before in a detective novel. Published in 1958, *The Dead Man's Knock* by the prolific writer of detective fiction, John Dickson Carr, also features a fictional, unrecorded Collins manuscript as well as letters to Dickens and a locked room murder.

90 GLOUCESTER PLACE

Collins's home for twenty years at 90 Gloucester Place (now renumbered 65) was for many years in a terrible state of dilapidation. It is good to be able to report that it has been completely renovated and seems to have been restored to residential use as in Collins's day, maintaining the large L-shaped drawing room where he did his writing and the impressive marble fireplace. There are details of the accommodation and some photographs on the property website <https://furnesspartnership.com/65-gloucester-place-london>. Pictures in its unrestored state can be found at https://www.wilkie-collins.info/home_gloucester.htm

KENSAL GREEN CEMETERY

WCS members who would like the opportunity of visiting Wilkie's grave (Number 31754, square 141, row 1, situated centrally behind the chapel) might like to combine this with the Kensal Green Cemetery open day, taking place on Saturday 7 July from 11.00am to 5.00pm. There will be frequent tours of the cemetery and catacombs together with historic hearses, stalls and refreshments. (See www.kensalgreen.co.uk)

BRITISH LIBRARY HISTORICAL REPRINTS

As mentioned in the 2011 Spring Newsletter, Collins's own adaptation of *Armadale*, *Miss Gwilt*, had been published by the British Library Historical Reprints series in the Poetry & Drama section. Mysteriously, however, this disappeared almost as soon as it became available and even the staff at the British Library disclaimed all knowledge of its publication. The reprint does seem to be back together with several other rare Collins titles. These are virtually impossible to find on the British Library website but are listed by the Book Depository.

The series states that "The Poetry & Drama collection includes books from the British Library digitised by Microsoft. The books reflect the complex and changing role of literature in society... containing many classic works from important dramatists and poets, this collection has something for every lover of the stage and verse." The books are published in a large paperback format and are simply straight facsimiles of all pages of the originals but without the benefit of any introduction or any other additional material. They represent a way of obtaining texts of otherwise unobtainable Collins material. The following are some of the more interesting Collins titles listed by the Book Depository with their discounted prices.

Miss Gwilt: A Drama in Five Acts. Altered from the Novel of "Armadale." by Wilkie Collins. ISBN 13: 9781241062606, ISBN 10: 1241062609 (£9.43).

No Name: A Drama, in Four Acts. Altered from the Novel for Performance on the Stage. by Wilkie Collins. ISBN 13: 9781241065997 ISBN 10: 1241065993 (£11.06).

The New Magdalen: A Dramatic Story, in a Prologue and Three Acts. by Wilkie Collins. ISBN 13: 9781241052324 ISBN 10: 1241052328 (£11.27).

The Moonstone: A Dramatic Story, in Three Acts. Altered from the Novel for Performance on the Stage. by Wilkie Collins. ISBN 13: 9781241064099 ISBN 10: 1241064091. (£11.53).

The Woman in White. a Drama, in a Prologue and Four Acts. Altered from the Novel for Performance on the Stage. by Wilkie Collins. ISBN 13: 9781241066642 ISBN 10:1241066647. (£13.99).

Another series from the British Library Historical Print Collections is 'Fiction & Prose Literature'. This includes two versions of *The Evil Genius*, the shorter of which is particularly interesting as it is a facsimile of the first chapter published by Tillotson in late 1885 as a one shilling 24 page pamphlet. This was what Collins called a 'bogus book', issued to protect the title before the main publication of the story.

The Evil Genius. ISBN 13: 9781241595081; ISBN 10: 1241595089 (£7.89)

WILKIE COLLINS VISITS THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF MUSICIANS

The archivist of the Royal Society of Musicians, Colin Coleman, has recently been working on the RSM's connection with Charles Dickens. He has kindly sent the following report of the 122th Anniversary Festival held at Freemason's Hall on 8 March 1860 which Wilkie attended as Dickens's guest.

The Society's Dinner, which soon came to be known as the Anniversary Festival, was held on an annual basis with food, music, speeches and much drink: in 1805 the caterer was to provide "Bread, Beer and strong Beer and one Bottle of Wine to each person".

Distinguished persons were invited to be Presidents for the evening and they gave lengthy speeches. The President was not necessarily a musician and in 1860 the author Charles Dickens held the position. The minutes of the Dinner Committee reveal that he was not the first choice as Lord Ward had initially been invited to take the position and the committee then proposed several names from which Mr Dickens was the then favourite. He was invited, accepted and gave a donation of £5. The Minute book records "A letter was read from Mr Chas Dickens promising to preside on the 8th of March".

Dickens brought along Wilkie Collins as his guest for the evening.

The Musical World of 10th March reported "The utmost hilarity prevailed throughout the evening in a great measure due to the president, who was the sun of the festival, and shed a light on all around, and infused warmth into every bosom. Mr. Charles Dickens ... made a decided hit. He was voted nem. con. the very best chairman who ever occupied the seat of honour at one of the Society's dinners".

THE WOMAN IN WHITE AND LOUISA NOTTIDGE: PARALLEL LIVES

James Miller has been continuing his research on the interesting parallels between the fictional Woman in White and the real life Louise Nottidge with the intention of publishing a book on the subject. Meanwhile, he has sent some of his current thoughts in the following piece which can be assessed **in** conjunction with the more usually accepted sources of Collins's novel such as Mejan's *Recueil des cause célèbres*.

The aims of this article are twofold: first, to record some of the striking parallels between the narrative of Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel and a series of events in the life of Louisa Nottidge; and second, to identify four episodes in the novel which can be traced, unmistakably, to the influence of the publicly recorded and debated experiences of Louisa Nottidge between 1846 and 1860.

Charles Dickens records Louisa's inveiglement in 1846 into an immoral Somerset sect, called The Abode Of Love, or Agapemone (1). Louisa's three sisters married three clergyman, also members of The Agapemone sect, on the same day in 1846 (2). The four Nottidge ladies were all unmarried heiresses, and fell under the influence of the sect's founder, Rev. James Henry Prince, a defrocked vicar.

Dickens compared his own private life in 1860 to an imagined stay at The Agapemone (3). William Thackeray submitted a cartoon to *Punch* magazine on May 1, 1851 called "The Original Agapemone in Danger".

Louisa's mother and brother-in-law, Frederick Ripley, feared that she also might marry into The Agapemone, thereby transmitting her considerable wealth to the sect. In 1846, Ripley travelled to Somerset and abducted Louisa against her will, imprisoning her in his London villa (12 Upper Woburn Place - less than a mile to the east of Regents Park), then placed her in Moor Croft House Asylum, Hillingdon, west London (4).

West London Asylums in 19th Century Literature (studymore.org.uk) examines Wilkie Collins' novel of 1860, and concludes that "The private asylum in which the woman in white had been confined appears to be west of London".

Louisa Nottidge escaped from Moor Croft House in 1848, and headed for London in order to meet up with Rev. William Cobbe, her brother-in-law from The Agapemone, at a small hotel in Cavendish Square (2). The evidence that the woman in white also took this journey lies both in her location, and her questions to the novel's narrator; Which way is it to central London?, Do you know any Baronets? Her question about a Baronet makes little sense within the narrative of the novel, until one learns that Rev. William Cobbe was an Irish Baronet, and the brother of Frances Power Cobbe, the feminist journalist and campaigner.

Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist and Reformer - by Sally Mitchell, contains the following (5):

At the end of June 1849 brother Will 's name showed up in *The Times* reports of a sensational trial. Early in 1848 Louisa Nottidge had escaped from the lunatic asylum, and Will had tried to help her get back to the Agapemone. They were intercepted at Farringdon Road Station, but once Will learned where she had been he asked the Commissioners in Lunacy to investigate. On 23 June 1849 the relatives accused of confining Louisa Nottidge against her will were put on trial in London [*Nottidge v Ripley and Another*]. The heat was intense, the courtroom was crowded and the testimony of Will and others aroused gusts of laughter. According to Lewis Price, the husband of another Nottidge resident at the Agapemone: "We have horse and carriages and we live in style ... we abjure prayer altogether ... we are glorifying God when we eat and drink. All of us play at "hockey" [actually a game called Blind Hookey, where bets are laid on the identity of a hidden card; see Thackeray's cartoon for *Punch*. JM] ... females as well as males."

William Cobbe requested the Commissioners for Lunacy to review Louisa's case, following her escape and recapture in 1848. Commissioner Bryan Procter wrote the report that liberated Louisa from asylum custody (2, 4). Collins later dedicated his novel, *The Woman In White*, to the same Bryan Procter. Louisa's case became known to the public as a result of two law cases, reported daily in *The Times*: the first, *Nottidge v Ripley and Another 1849*; and second, *Nottidge v Prince 1860*.

These four episodes in particular from the novel, *The Woman in White* - the escape from the asylum, the Regents Park / Cavendish Square meeting by moonlight, looking for a Baronet, and the novel's dedication to Bryan Procter - can be directly linked to the events in the much publicised life of Louisa Nottidge after 1848. When Harriet Martineau wrote a biographical sketch of Bryan Procter (aka. the writer Barry Cornwall) he, or she, selected one case as the most prominent in his long career as Commissioner for Lunacy - the case of Louisa Nottidge and her abduction from *The Agapemone* (6).

Louisa Nottidge is a relative of this writer's mother, Faith Nottidge.

Sources

- (1) *The Household Narrative of Current Events*, 1850, p.110, Charles Dickens
- (2) *Spiritual Wives*, 1868, William Dixon
- (3) *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Chapter 16, 1860, Charles Dickens
- (4) *Religious Fanaticism and Wrongful Confinement in Victorian England: The Affair of Louisa Nottidge*, 1996, J.J. Schwieso
- (5) *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist and Reformer* - Sally Mitchell
- (6) *Biographical Sketches: Barry Cornwall*, 1869, Harriet Martineau

THE LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL

This year's Ledbury Poetry Festival takes place from 29 June to 8 July. As usual, it gives the opportunity to attend writing workshops, reading groups, meet publishers and agents or just attend readings and performances by the wide array of poets and performers. There is also the annual poetry competition with a prize of £1000. Further details from <https://ledburypoetry.org.uk> and 0845 4581743.

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