WILKIE COLLINS IN PARLIAMENT

By Julien Foster

Wilkie Collins makes a number of references to Parliament within his fiction. Here are a few, selected at random. The following remark by Professor Pesca: *"One of these days I go into your noble Parliament. It is the dream of my whole life to be Honourable Pesca, M.P.!"* Basil telling us that his ambition is *'·not to make a name in parliament, but a name in literature".* Gabriel Betteredge: *"An easy people to govern, in the Parliament and in the Kitchen-that's the moral of it".* 1 am tempted to fall into the trap of reading such references as autobiographical clues, giving us information about Collins's own beliefs. Instead, let me tum from Collins's own writing about Parliament to the utterings of Parliamentarians about the author - as recorded in the Official Reports of proceedings in both Houses of Parliament.

The first reference in Parliament to Wilkie was made on 3 May 1865, at the time when *Armadale* was being serialised for the first time in *The Cornhil1 Magazine.* The remark came from Lord Elcho, a Whig, who became President of the London Homeopathic Hospital and whose future granddaughter was to marry the as yet unborn Evelyn Waugh. Speaking in a debate about the extension of the franchise, this is what the politician said:

"It so happens that I cast my eye the other day on a page in Mr. Kaye's History of the Indian Mutiny a book which contains writing as pleasant, effective, and exciting as anything in any of Mr. Wilkie Collins's or Miss Braddon's novels." (HC Deb 03 May 1865 vol 178 eel 372-450)

This is the one reference in Parliament to the novelist during Wilkie's lifetime. While Lord Elcho's instincts about the novelist may have been sound, it is perhaps fair to say that the views he expresses elsewhere in the speech about the extension of the franchise are - judged by current thinking - somewhat undemocratic. *"I can say, from many years' experience in Parliament",* he informs the House, *"that although the working classes have no special representatives here, yet their interests are well looked after - and that in preference to the interests of any other class of the community".* He goes on to assert that extending the franchise to the working classes as provided for in the Bill before the House would prevent them from bettering themselves: *"When this Bill is spoken of as a gigantic instrument for raising the condition of the working classes, I believe it will have the effect of taking away a stimulus to providence and to the ambition of getting into a good house, and so getting possession of the franchise".*

The year of Collins's death coincided with the decision of Henry Hansard to break the family connection with the reporting of Parliamentary debates, but the Official Reports have continued until the present day to be known colloquially as Hansard.

It was not for almost a hundred years after the first reference to Wilkie in Parliament that he was mentioned again, in 1965, during Harold Wilson's first administration, this time by a Conservative backbencher, Dr Wyndham Davies, in a debate about doctors' pay and conditions, in order to embarrass a Labour Minister:

"The Minister has given two long articles to the publication Medical News in the past 12 months. The last, a few weeks ago, was very non-committal, apart from some thoughts on Wilkie Collins. When he was challenged on the abuse of general practice by inconsiderate

patients, he said: 'People only go to the doctor when they have to. I don't think any good G. P. will want to bring about that situation.' This shows how much the right hon. Gentleman is out of touch with the profession."

Given that Kenneth Robinson, the Minister in question, was Wilkie's first major biographer (1951), it is perhaps unsurprising if his thoughts on this occasion strayed from the undoubtedly important issue of healthcare: it may, however, be taking speculation too far to suggest that his views about doctors might have mirrored those of his biographical subject. On this occasion, Kenneth Robinson does not appear exercised about the allegation that he is more concerned with sensational fiction than healthcare. However, he is plainly anxious to disassociate himself from the scurrilous suggestion that he had indulged in any journalistic activity. In reply, he states:

"I should correct the record, since Ministers do not write articles for journals. The piece to which the hon. Gentleman is referring was an interview which I gave to the editor of the Medical News a couple of weeks ago." (HC Deb 17 March 1965 vol 708 cc1316-408)

The account of the interview in question appears in *Medical News* (5 March 1965 pp I 0 -11). It turns out that it was unfair of the Conservative backbencher to imply that it was the Minister who had raised the subject at the expense of addressing issues relating to his portfolio. The very first words of Dr David Carrick, the interviewer, were: *"What, Sir, is Wilkie Collins to you?"* And Robinson's answer is charn1ingly straightforward: "/ *read his books and liked them. Then I found that nobody had written his biography. So I did."* The remainder of the interview deals with various topical medical controversies, including one of Kenneth Robinson's main interests which does in fact chime with an abiding interest of the novelist, namely mental health. It is not the Minister but the good doctor who fails to resist returning to the absorbing subject of Wilkie, when he concludes in his interview that Kenneth Robinson's answers *"require close study. Consider Wilkie Collins and the matter of the Minister's interest in mental health. They suggest the sort of ambition coupled with opportunism essential to the progress of a first-class politician. And let nobody be fooled. This man is shrewd, urbane, very well-informed, superb in debate and, I would think, ruthless if necessary".* It is almost as though Dr Carrick is describing Count Fosco. Be that as it may, the piece, running to five columns, in no way supports the jibe by the backbencher.

Wilkie was mentioned again in 1973 - twice.

The MP Leo Abse said this in a debate concerning the police, perhaps with Inspector Cuff or *Mr. Policeman and the Cook/Who Killed Zebedee?* in mind:

"The fact is, as descriptions of police in novels by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins or as music hall songs and jokes and similar anecdotal evidence establish, that during the whole of the last century the English policeman has been for his peers not only an object of respect but also a model of ideal male character, self-controlled, possessing more strength than he ever has to use in the gravest emergency, fair and impartial-in short, a man who followed the regulation laid down by a Mr. Mayne, one of the first two commissioners in 1830: The constable must remember that there is no qualification more indispensable to a police officer than a perfect command of temper, never suffering himself to be moved in the slightest degree by any language or threats that may be used: if he does his duty in a quiet and determined manner, such conduct would probably induce well-disposed bystanders to assist him should he require it. That emphasis on the prevention of aggression, on the preserving of the peace

by a group of powerful men demonstrating self-restraint, was a novelty in English public life, but it had a powerful influence on the character of most of the population who, so to speak, encapsulated the policeman as an ideal and hence became progressively more and more self-policing." (HC Deb 23 February 1973 vol 851 cc934-l 030)

A few months later, Patrick Cormack, now Baron Cormack, said the following in a debate about "acceptance in satisfaction of estate duty of certain objects and collections":

"But if one considers the National Portrait Gallery and realises that it is still possible to buy a very good portrait of some worthy not represented in the gallery-one thinks of the Wilkie Collins sold yesterday-for £1,000 or £1,500, surely these are the institutions which could be caught by this 25 per cent. provision." (HC Deb 11 April 1973 vol 854 ccl455-69)

Patrick Cormack had plainly read his *Times* that morning, where there *is* a small piece about the sale of the picture - but misremembered the price it fetched. The picture was in fact sold for £2,200. The paper's Sale Room Correspondent commented: *"A small portrait, even of a sitter in whom there is much interest, is not usually an expensive item".* Sotheby's estimate on the picture had been £250 - £500.

Most recently, it has been in the House of Lords rather than the Commons that Wilkie has been mentioned. In 1993, the Judge Lord Wilberforce (like the present writer but unlike Wilkie, a member of Middle Temple) had this to say in the House of Lords about the Offences against the Person Act 1861 during a debate on the Queen's Speech:

"Secondly, it is not just that the law is archaic, quaintly archaic though indeed it is. It contains sections in regard lo choking, administering laudanum and denying food or clothing to an apprentice-it is the world of Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Phineas Finn." (HL Deb 23 November 1993 vol 550 ccl42-252)

Lord Wilberforce has a point. The Act received Royal Assent on 6 August I 861, just under a year after the first serialisation of *The Woman in White* in *All The Year Round* came to an end. Section 22, as originally enacted, provides as follows: *"Whosoever shall unlawfully apply or administer to or cause to be taken by, or attempt to apply or administer to or attempt to cause to be administered to or taken by, any Person, any Chloroform, laudanum, or other stupefying or overpowering Drug, Mauer, or Thing, with Intent in any of such Cases thereby to enable himself or any other Person to commit, or with Intent in any of such Cases thereby to assist any other Person in committing, any indictable Offence, shall be guilty of Felony".* That section, although slightly amended, remains in force today. No doubt it would have provided a means to prosecute Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco, but for other events prevailing...

In 2005, Baroness Buscombe made one of the few Parliamentary references to *The Woman in White,* but only in order to make an excuse for the non-attendance of the man who turned it into a musical:

"Taking this point further, my noble friend lord Lloyd Webber, who sadly cannot be in his place this evening because he is, as we speak, preparing to open "The Woman in White" on Broadway tonight, has asked me to express, on his behalf. the crucial importance of ensuring that moneys earmarked for music services actually reach the right destination." (HL Deb 16 November 2005 vol 675 column 1152)

The same musical is cited during a Select Committee's deliberations about the dangers caused by cycle rickshaws congregating outside theatres *(Committee on the London Local Authorities and Transport for London Bill* - Minutes of Evidence, I November 2005, sections 20-39).

Finally and as recently as 2011, Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall spoke in a debate about International Women's Day. There was a reference not only to Wilkie but also (a slightly apologetic one) to a writer of crime fiction. The reference was not, alas, to the peer with perhaps an even greater interest in Wilkie than even Lord Lloyd Webber, namely Baroness James of Holland Park. This, in any event, is what the noble Baroness said:

"If you go back a bit further into the 19th century and beyond, the picture is even more starkly different. Clothes had to be made by hand, either by the person who was going to wear them or, for the better off, by a professional tailor or seamstress in the community. Making clothes was hard work. They had to last and they were often therefore reinvented by the addition of small embellishments, such as lace or ribbons, remade to suit changed shape or fashion, or passed on to others. How do I know this? It is not from serious study, but from reading novels-not, I regret, the novels of my noble friend Lady Rendell, but mostly the novels of the 19th century. If you take any of the great writers of that period-Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and who remembers The Moonstone and the vital importance of a handmade nightgown to the plot of that novel? - you will find it all there in the detail of those novels. Most women and some men, until two or three generations ago, whatever social class they belonged to, would have had some skill in sewing, knitting, perhaps even /ace-making or embroidery, and most importantly in repairing clothes. S11ch simple domestic accomplishments became unfashionable, I think largely from the point at which women began to seek a wider role in public life. Of course I do not regret that, b11t it had this consequence, among many others." (HL Deb 3 March 2011 vol 725 column 1287)

What would Wilkie have thought about a debate concerning International Women's Day? What would he have thought about the notion that by then, not only did women have the vote but there had been women at the highest level in government? I rather suspect that he might even have found himself agreeing rather more heartily with the views expressed by Baroness McIntosh than his contemporary, Lord Elcho. Reassuringly, when they express any opinion at all on his writing, the Parliamentarians are unanimous in acknowledging Wilkie's contribution to our perception of Victorian Britain.

Julien Foster, August 2014

Note: I am indebted to Paul Lewis for reading a number of early drafts, making a number of suggestions for its improvement, providing me with the fruits of his own research and correcting my various slips with the utmost tact. Any errors which remain are my own.