



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

COLLINS THE CAMPAIGNER

by

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[This article originally appeared in the Journal of the Society of Authors, *The Author*, VOL CXXVI, No. 1, Spring 2015. Reproduced by kind permission of Andrew Lycett and James McConnachie, editor.]

‘Nothing will induce me to modify the title’, inveighed Wilkie Collins to his publisher George Bentley. ‘His proposal would be an impertinence if he was not an old fool.’

The author’s anger was directed at Charles Mudie, influential owner of Mudie’s, the circulating library which dominated the Victorian bookselling trade. It had been sparked because Mudie thought the title of Wilkie’s 1873 novel *The New Magdalen* conjured up unseemly connotations of prostitution (which indeed was the theme) and he wanted it changed.

Wilkie, like many others, had consistently attacked Mudie’s market sway, which allowed it not only to dictate terms of contracts (and remuneration) but also to influence greatly the type of books Victorians read.

Publishing is littered with stories about intermediaries which have enjoyed temporary market ascendancy. Amazon is only the latest example; printers, the Stationers Company and agents came before.

At issue in this case was the way that circulating libraries such as Mudie’s and W.H. Smith perpetuated an outdated method of publishing novels – via the three volume edition or ‘triple-decker’. Each volume cost half a guinea (10s 6d or roughly £50 in today’s money, way beyond the average person’s purse). Or else a reader had to cough up a guinea a year to take out the book, one volume at a time, from Mudie’s. It wasn’t a system which served authors or readers because it failed to reach the ‘Unknown Public’, the body of newly literate readers of cheap railway-stall periodicals which Wilkie identified in an 1858 essay in his friend Charles Dickens’s magazine, *Household Words*.

Wilkie proved a particularly canny operator over a lengthy writing career which covered most of the second half of the nineteenth century. He became a resolute advocate on behalf of authors – something which was recognised when he became one of the first Vice-Presidents of the Society of Authors.

His assertiveness started with his first published book, a memoir of his father, the artist, William Collins, which he produced on a subscription basis in 1848. Wilkie had had 750 copies expensively printed by Longmans, and when, only eight months later, he had shifted more than half of this number at a guinea each, he declared himself in profit.

This early Victorian form of crowd-sourcing seemed such a doddle that he was encouraged to give up the law and pursue a career as a writer. He was disabused of any great optimism when he struggled to find a publisher for his next book, the historical romance, *Antonina*. Eventually he agreed a deal with Richard Bentley who paid him £100, with £100 more if sold 500 copies there is no evidence that he did.

Wilkie was soon complaining about Bentley’s inefficiencies, particularly after the publisher placed an advertisement in *The Times* which billed his 1851 Christmas book *Mr Wray’s Cash-Box* as *Cash-Book*, described him as the author of *Antonini*, and misspelled as Willais the surname of his friend John Everett Millais, whom he had drafted in to draw a frontispiece.

Wilkie began campaigning to shake up the publishing industry. He attended a meeting to protest against the restrictive practices of major publishers such as John Murray. Also there was Charles Dickens, the greatest author of the age, who befriended Wilkie and invited him to join the staff of his weekly magazine, *Household Words*.

Having identified the Unknown Public, Wilkie decided that writers like himself had a duty to reach out to this new body of readers, lobbying in favour of accessible single volume editions and against the triple-decker. He started writing for this market, more or less inventing the genre of 'sensation fiction', which appealed directly to readers' emotions with spine-tingling incidents and cliff-hanging chapter endings.

His novel *The Woman in White*, initially published serially in *All the Year Round* and then in three volumes by Sampson Low in 1860, brought Wilkie acclaim and financial success. The publisher Smith, Elder was so annoyed at failing to secure the rights that it offered a mouth-watering £5,000 for Wilkie's next book but one, *Armada*. Wilkie was exultant, telling his mother that no one except Dickens had ever been paid so much.

Dickens, who had enjoyed great success with his monthly instalments of the *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* in the late 1830s, helped convince Wilkie of the importance of serials in magazines and later newspapers. Mere volume rights didn't bring in much. At the start of his career Wilkie was paid only £150 for all rights to his novel *Hide and Seek* (1854). But, as education and literacy expanded, serials offered significant additional returns. And the need to keep readers returning from week to week only enhanced the demand for gripping story-lines, and helped boost Wilkie's type of sensation fiction.

Wilkie got into the habit of shuffling his copyrights. He would lease a publisher the right to print a specific number of copies, while he himself retained the copyright, which he could then offer to others for specific uses and periods of time. In 1872 Bentley was allowed to put out an edition of 2,000 copies of *Poor Miss Finch* (for £750). After some haggling, he also sold serial rights to *Cassell's Magazine* (for £600). However the books business proved eternally tricky: rather than buy the Bentley edition for its library customers, W. H. Smith slyly acquired 400 bound up copies of the serial extracts which had appeared in *Cassell's*.

Wilkie's strategy meant that he changed publishers regularly, and arguably missed out on not having anyone in particular to promote his talent. So in 1874 he sold his catalogue to the new publisher Chatto & Windus, which brought out the majority of his books in a uniform edition.

By then Wilkie had discovered an additional revenue stream - the theatre - but this came with caveats, since the copyright in a printed book did not extend to the stage. After seeing several novels turned into unauthorised plays, he learnt to write dramatic versions explicitly for the theatre, and these were often 'read-through' simply to establish copyright. A four month run of *The New Magdalen* at London's Olympic Theatre in 1873 netted him £600, helping him maintain his extravagant lifestyle, with his opium consumption and his two mistresses with their separate families. But even in the last year of his life, he was still

claiming that ‘the stupid copyright law of England allows any scoundrel possessing a pot of paste and a pair of scissors to steal our novels for stage purposes.’

Another source of income was foreign rights. Like most British authors, he was contemptuous of overseas publishers who, in the absence of any international copyright agreement, used material without permission and without payment. Wilkie was incensed when the Dutch publisher Belinfante Brothers wrote to him as ‘Madame Collins’, offering to pay him with a single copy of its Dutch-language magazine *Stuivers Magazijn*.

‘It is quite a new idea - you might give me some money,’ he answered reproachfully: ‘Why not, gentlemen, if you publish my book? Do your translators write for nothing? Do your printers work for nothing? Do your paper-makers give you paper for nothing? Do you yourselves publish for the honour and glory of Literature, without making a single farthing by it?’

His real venom was reserved for American publishers who, in the absence of any reciprocal copyright agreement, shamelessly pirated British authors. Wilkie developed a working relationship with Harper Brothers, one of the more scrupulous in the business. But that didn’t stop others reproducing his works – a practice Wilkie regarded as theft, as he made clear in an angry pamphlet ‘Considerations on the Copyright Question’, published in 1880 and reprinted in the second issue of the *The Author* ten years later. He claimed one US publisher sold 120,000 copies of *The Woman in White* and never paid him sixpence.

With this diversification of his portfolio of rights, no working author could handle the requisite negotiations alone. Wilkie had long relied for advice on his solicitor and on a banker friend. In 1881 he became one of the first authors to employ a literary agent, a Scotsman called A. P. Watt, whose experience in the books trade included printing the early copies of *The Author*. Like Rudyard Kipling, he was probably introduced to Watt by his friend, Walter Besant, the first Chairman of the Society of Authors. After Wilkie’s death in 1889, it was Besant who finished his last, uncompleted novel *Blind Love*.

The previous year, Wilkie had dutifully turned out (with Oscar Wilde) at a Society of Authors dinner to honour American authors who had lobbied their government for a change in US copyright laws to protect the interests of foreigners. But it wasn’t until the Chace Act of 1891 that British copyright was recognised in the United States.

The triple-decker lurched on until 1894 when its demise was noted in a poem by Kipling who, comparing it to the old three-decked ‘ship of the line’, described it as ‘the only certain packet for the Islands of the Blest’.

It was no use being nostalgic. By then the business of authorship had changed irrevocably. It was more inclusive, more aware of its rights and ‘property’, and more professional, even if early members of the Society of Authors found they were accused of sacrificing art for trade. Not that Wilkie would have minded: this was the outcome he had worked for all his life.