

## WILKIE AND THE LOUDONS

*Occasionally a new window is opened onto the life of Wilkie Collins. Until recently the friendship between the Collins family and the naturalists Jane and John Loudon<sup>1</sup> was not recognised – at least by Wilkie Collins scholars. But an 1893 article in Temple Bar and a book published in 1961 about Jane Loudon have revealed many new details, especially of Wilkie's youth.*

### Beginnings

The Collins family – the artist William Collins, his wife Harriet nee Geddes, and their two boys William Wilkie and Charles Allston, moved to 30 Porchester Terrace in the Summer of 1830. Shortly after, on 14 September 1830, their neighbour at no. 3, John Claudius Loudon, married Jane Wells Webb. Agnes, their only child, was born on 19 October 1832. By then Wilkie was 8 and Charles 4. No. 3 Porchester Terrace remained the Loudon family home until at least 1858.

It is not clear if the friendship between the families formed then. Harriet Collins's diary for 1835 is extant and her entries comprise mainly two or three lines per day of what she and her sons did, who was ill, and which friends she saw. None of her activities relate to the Loudons and only one entry, on 22 September, mentions the name

“In the morn W<sup>m</sup> went to Loudon's”<sup>2</sup>

Certainly they both took many walks in the nearby Kensington Gardens but it is not recorded if they met each other there. If they did form a friendship there, it survived the Collins family leaving for Italy in 1836 and then living in several other houses after their return to England in 1838. Certainly Jane and Harriet were close friends later, after the deaths of their husbands – John in 1843 and William in 1847.<sup>3</sup>

Before John's death the Loudons held many lavish evening dinner parties for twelve or more.<sup>4</sup> As a widow Jane was less well off and the socialising stopped. But when her daughter reached her mid-teens Jane wanted to launch her into society and embarked on less expensive evening social events such as charades and dances.<sup>5</sup> They became so popular among the children of artists and writers that 3 Porchester Terrace was described by one contemporary as “the *Ultima Thule* of cabland”.<sup>6</sup> At these dances Agnes, described as “sweet and laughter loving”<sup>7</sup> with golden ringlets and blue eyes,<sup>8</sup> was very attracted to the “tall slender figure and vivid blue eyes”<sup>9</sup> of Charles Collins who became her favourite dancing partner. Wilkie and Charles Collins “rarely missed” these events.<sup>10</sup> As part of Jane's economy, the dances were accompanied only by “cakes and lemonade”. Harriet Collins told Janet Wills (née Chambers and wife of Dickens's subeditor W H Wills) that she “always knew when her sons had been at a dance at Mrs. Loudon's, for they invariably made a raid on the larder on their return home.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The landscape gardener John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843: ODNB) and the botanical and gardening writer Jane Wells née Webb (1807–1858: ODNB).

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Collins, Diary, 1835, National Art Library MSL/1912/125, call no. 86.EE.33, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Bea Howe, *Lady with Green Fingers – The Life of Jane Loudon*, London: Country Life 1961, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Howe p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Andrew Crosse (Cornelia Augusta Hewett Crosse née Berkeley) ‘A Group of Naturalists’, Temple Bar, vol. 98, July 1893, p. 364.

<sup>6</sup> Crosse p. 364

<sup>7</sup> Crosse p. 359

<sup>8</sup> Howe pp. 99, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Howe p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Crosse p. 365.

<sup>11</sup> Crosse p. 365.

## Plays

In the spring of 1849 Agnes, then 16, was invited by Wilkie to play the part of Miss Richland in their domestic production of Goldsmith's comedy *The Good-Natur'd Man* staged in what Wilkie called the Theatre Royal Back-Drawing Room at the Collins's home at 38 Blandford Square.<sup>12</sup> Her mother Jane acted as chaperone at all the rehearsals, hardly surprising with several young men in the cast from the Loudon's and the Collins's artistic circles.

At the dress rehearsal on Monday 18 June 1849 Harriet Collins told Jane "how pretty Agnes looked in her stage dress. No one could take their eyes off her." Agnes herself enjoyed the attention and hoped she had been a social success.<sup>13</sup>

The next night, Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup>, the play was well received. Some of Dickens's family were in the audience and "congratulated Jane on her pretty daughter's performance".<sup>14</sup>

That summer Wilkie and Charley, with Jane as chaperone, took Agnes to see Charles Kean as Macbeth at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. We do not know the date but it was played from 5 June to 19<sup>th</sup>. Later they went to see him as the lead in Westland Marston's historical tragedy *Strathmore* which premièred at the same theatre on 20 June and ran until Saturday 21 July.<sup>15</sup> In those months Agnes had a "memorable summer of never-ending gaieties" though it is not known what further part, if any, the Collins brothers played in it.<sup>16</sup>

One Sunday in March or April 1850 Wilkie and Charles together with Edward Ward, Augustus Egg, and Charles Landseer were invited to a dinner at Porchester Terrace to celebrate Jane Loudon's success at holding onto her job as editor of *The Ladies Companion* after problems with the proprietor, Frederick Evans (of the publisher Bradbury & Evans). Others dropped in after dinner and "Agnes was in her element and took her flock of young men down into the kitchen to make Sherry Flip".<sup>17</sup> But the respite was to be temporary. The troubles over the editorship continued and Agnes wrote in her diary on Sunday 5 May of the "perpetual vicissitudes" of editors of periodicals adding "Wilkie Collins is positively preparing a new edition of his book. How lucky he has been!"<sup>18</sup> On 13 June 1850 Jane was asked to resign as editor. Henry F Chorley took over and her last edition was on 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>19</sup>

## The Lighthouse

On 10 August 1857 Wilkie's play *The Lighthouse* opened at the Royal Olympic Theatre in the Strand to packed houses.<sup>20</sup> It remained popular; on Monday 5 October Wilkie wrote to his mother

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<sup>12</sup> Howe p. 99. See also Catherine Peters *The King of Inventors*, London: Secker & Warburg 1991, pp. 82-83 and [0058] WC to Miss Clarkson [5/12 June] 1849). References to letters written by Wilkie Collins give the standard number of the online edition of his letters due to be published in 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Howe p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Howe p. 105. From the phrase 'the Dickens family' probably Catherine Dickens rather than Charles – see Howe p.97 and Crosse pp. 394-395.

<sup>15</sup> Dates established from the *Times*.

<sup>16</sup> Howe p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> Howe p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> Howe pp. 120-121. She must be referring to the second edition of Wilkie's first published novel *Antonina* originally published on 28 February 1850 which he revised with an amended Preface dates May 1850 for the second edition published in July.

<sup>19</sup> Howe p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> [0263] WC to Harriet Collins 10 August 1857.

Immense success of *The Lighthouse*. The other night the stalls were so full that the people had to be accommodated in the orchestra. Saturday last, I tried to get a private box for the Loudons and found they were all taken.<sup>21</sup>

The Loudons by then were just Jane and Agnes and he did get tickets for them the following week. At the end of a letter to Agnes on Sunday 11 October he wrote in a postscript

I am glad to hear that you liked "*The Lighthouse*". You will guess what my opinion of Robson is, when I tell you that I have engaged to write another play for the Olympic in which he is to have as strong a character as I can make for him.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly Frederick Robson had made an impression on Agnes in the lead role of Alan Gurnock. But a previous engagement of his meant the successful run ended shortly after on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> and, despite Wilkie's hopes, it was not revived.<sup>23</sup>

### **Birthday**

Wilkie's letter was a reply to Agnes's invitation for him and Charles to her birthday dinner on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> October 1857.

For her twenty-fifth birthday, her mother organized one of her best dinner parties, including such old friends as Charles Landseer, Wilkie Collins, Palgrave, Louis Blanc, the French patriot, and the Bonomis.<sup>24</sup> It was a most successful evening.<sup>25</sup>

However, it seems unlikely that Wilkie did attend. He replied

Charles will be delighted to accept your kind invitation, and I should be very glad to accompany him – but I am again on the "sick-list". My sprained ankle has prevented me from taking exercise, and want of exercise has ended in the return of some of my old bilious miseries. I have just been writing to the doctor, and I am terribly afraid that I shall be in the society of physic-bottles on Thursday night.<sup>26</sup>

Bea Howe, the author of Jane Loudon's biography, relied for a lot of her detail on a diary kept by Agnes from January 1849 to the end of her life.<sup>27</sup> It is probable that the diary – the whereabouts of which are currently unknown – recorded the guests invited but not necessarily those attending. The diary is especially important because after suffering an illness for many months, the ailing Jane Loudon burned almost all her correspondence and papers on 18 June 1858.<sup>28</sup>

### **Funeral**

Jane died on Tuesday 13 July 1858

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<sup>21</sup> [0267] WC to Harriet Collins, 5 October 1857.

<sup>22</sup> [0268] WC to Agnes Loudon, 11 October 1857. Robson was to be Hans Grimm in Wilkie's *The Red Vial* which ran for only 30 performances at the Olympic (11 October to 13 November 1858) after poor audience reaction.

<sup>23</sup> [0269] WC to John Palgrave Simpson, 17 October 1857. Last performance confirmed by entries in the *Times* 17 October and 19 October.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Bonomi (1796-1878: ODNB) the sculptor, artist, and curator and his wife Jessie née Martin.

<sup>25</sup> Howe pp. 157-158.

<sup>26</sup> [0268] WC to Agnes Loudon, 11 October 1857.

<sup>27</sup> Howe pp. 12, 97.

<sup>28</sup> Howe p. 161.

Four days later, on Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> July, Jane Wells Loudon was buried beside her husband in Kensal Green cemetery. Charles Landseer, her faithful friend, Mr Wooster, her late amanuensis, Spencer Lewin, her solicitor, Mr Bonomi, Augustus Egg and Wilkie Collins all attended the funeral as principle mourners.<sup>29</sup>

Wilkie's attendance at the funeral is contradicted by a letter he wrote the day before to the poet and editor Richard Monckton Milnes, who had sent him a pamphlet about witchcraft

I am going away today to pay some visits in the country, and there is, I fear, no chance of my being able to get back to town in time to avail myself of your kind invitation.<sup>30</sup>

However, it seems likely that this letter was no more than an excuse. He resisted at least four subsequent invitations from Milnes.<sup>31</sup> Although no confirming evidence of his presence has been found, Howe is so clear as to his role – presumably taking the information from Agnes's diary – it can be assumed he did attend as a principle mourner.

No further reference to Agnes or her family is found in Wilkie's letters.

### **Marriage and death**

On 26 December 1858, six months after her mother's death, Agnes married the solicitor and political organiser Markham Spofforth. Her first child, Beatrice, was born on 20 August 1860 but while she was being cared for by relatives in Howden, Yorkshire, near where Spofforth was born and where his parents still lived, she died of diarrhoea. Her second child, Walter Loudon, was born on 21 November 1861. Her third child, a girl, was born eighteen months later on 13 May 1863. The birth left Agnes unwell and she died a month later aged 30 of puerperal fever.<sup>32</sup> Markham placed a death notice in *The Times*

On Saturday, the 13<sup>th</sup> inst., at 3 Porchester-terrace, Agnes, the beloved wife of Markham Spofforth, and daughter of the late John Claudius Loudon, Esq.<sup>33</sup>

She was buried in Kensal Green cemetery. A few days afterwards, on 21 June, Markham christened the baby Agnes Loudon. Although he remarried – to Elizabeth Meller in 1889 – his second wife died in 1896 and after his own death in January 1907 he was buried in Kensal Green cemetery next to his "beloved wife" Agnes.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Howe p. 164 and Kensal Green records.

<sup>30</sup> [0286] WC to Richard Monckton Milnes, 16 July 1858.

<sup>31</sup> [0365] 7 August 1860, [0414] 23 April 1860, [3153] 4 May 1864, [1677] 15 May 1877.

<sup>32</sup> Information in this paragraph records retrieved from ancestry.co.uk

<sup>33</sup> *The Times*, 16 June 1863, p. 1a.

<sup>34</sup> Records from ancestry.co.uk and deceasedonline.com.