



# *THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY*

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## **NEWSLETTER**

**WINTER 2018-2019**

### **HOW WILKIE WORKED**

An extraordinary account of Wilkie's working methods has been found in a letter dating from 1882 which had lain unnoticed for seventy years.

To me, my characters are living beings, and my mind becomes (in some way quite incomprehensible to me) their mind, in the process of creating them. I make no apology for speaking of myself in this way to you. Such experience as your's [*sic*] of the inner mental mysteries may even be interested in the mental process which produces works of fiction. When I am walking up and down my study, completely absorbed in the joys and sorrows of a non-existent person, I am inclined (when the "fit" is over) to ask myself if the line may not be a fine one which divides this sort of excitement from the approaches perhaps of certain forms of insanity? (Wilkie Collins to Murdoch Macleod, 23 March 1882).

The letter was written to a psychiatrist – as we would call him now – Murdoch Macleod when he was Superintendent of the East Riding of Yorkshire Asylum in charge of more than 250 patients and 40 staff. Macleod had clearly written to Wilkie about *Poor Miss Finch* published ten years earlier, the main character of which is blind but has her sight briefly restored. Macleod had himself written a short note for the *Journal of Mental Science* about blindness and other sensory loss causing insanity.

The letter was in the collection of publisher, bookseller, and wigmaker James Stevens (1910-1997) who bought it for £2 at Sotheby's in 1948. Although that passage was transcribed in Sotheby's catalogue it had not been noticed until it was sold by Forum Auctions in 2018.

The full text – along with eleven other newly-found letters – is in *The Letters of Wilkie Collins Addenda & Corrigenda 12* which is enclosed with this newsletter.

## ***THE WOMAN IN WHITE***

The Woman in White continues to fascinate and influence people. An interesting article by crime writer Radha Vatsal was found by Sorcha Ogle and posted to the Facebook pages of The Wilkie Collins Appreciation Society. You can join at [www.facebook.com/groups/2228650086/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/2228650086/) and read Sorcha's lengthy essay 'What we owe to Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*' at <https://crimereads.com/what-we-owe-to-wilkie-collins-the-woman-in-white/>

The extraordinary range of secondary characters that Collins employs. These might be minor figures like Laura's governess Mrs. Vesey: "Some of us rush through life; and some of us saunter through life. Mrs. Vesey sat through life." Or Laura's uncle and guardian, Frederick Fairlie, "a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man," who would prefer that his niece sign a reckless prenuptial agreement rather than deal with the bother of contesting it.

Another very enjoyable account of Wilkie and his love of women is found at <https://narratively.com/this-novelists-female-heroes-and-brazen-polyamory-shocked-victorian-england/>. This includes of course the account of his meeting with the acknowledged real life woman in white – his lover Caroline Graves – recounted by the son of his friend John Everett Millais.

*The Woman in White* also features in a Language and Literature Timeline on the British Library website <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126943.html>. Author Pat Barker listed *No Name* as Wilkie's underrated novel in *The Guardian* (31 August 2018), giving this rather strange analysis of Wilkie's work.

As good as *The Moonstone* or *The Woman in White*. It has Collins's trademark ability to create powerful female characters who then make him so nervous he can't wait to put them back in their box.

## **MORE ON THE ORIGINS OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE***

A letter inserted in a first edition of *The Woman in White* has recently come to light and possibly sheds some new light on the origins of Wilkie's most popular novel.

The handwritten note dated 18 December 1954 from a Rita Browne to Georgette Agnew, refers to the John Monsell Christians: 'Through one of the Curwens I have secured portraits, from a family who farmed Ewanrigg, of Henry Taubman Christian 19<sup>th</sup>. & his mental wife. Rather awful daubs, but interesting as Wilkie Collins based "The Woman in White" on Uncle Henry's Wife.' It has been known for some time that Ewanrigg Hall in Cumberland was the likely model for Limmeridge House in *The Woman in White*. Closely following the Collins-Dickens route in 'The Lazy Tour', Walter Hartright writes

My travelling instructions directed me to go to Carlisle, and then to diverge by a branch railway which ran in the direction of the coast..... When I rose the next morning and drew up my blind, the sea opened before me joyously under the broad August sunlight, and the distant coast of Scotland fringed the horizon with its lines of melting blue.

Limmeridge House can also be found on a map of fictional locations, although a WCS member has pointed out “It’s not sufficiently close to the sea!”.

<https://londonist.com/london/maps/fake-britain-map-fictional-locations-england-scotland-wales>.

Ewanrigg Hall was the home of the Christian family and Fletcher Christian of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame was born there in 1764. Henry Taubman Christian (1810-1859) occupied the house for many years and his widow apparently descended into madness and ended her days in the Dunston Lodge Lunatic Asylum in Gateshead. The famous meeting of Wilkie and Caroline Graves was always assumed to be the origin for ‘the woman in white’ but do we now have another contender?

The main building was demolished in 1903 leaving just a farmhouse. This was destroyed by fire in 2015 and has been sold to a property developer seeking to obtain planning consent for its conversion to five homes and the building of another 125 units on the surrounding land. An opportunity to live in the Fairlie’s ancestral home!

For contemporary illustrations and a more detailed history of the house refer to the House and Heritage website [houseandheritage.org/2017/04/07/ewanrigg-hall/](http://houseandheritage.org/2017/04/07/ewanrigg-hall/); the Lost Heritage website also features a contemporary illustration. For a Heritage Statement which gives a comprehensive history and architectural assessment you can refer to: [planning.allerdale.gov.uk/portal/servlets/AttachmentShowServlet?ImageName=327028](http://planning.allerdale.gov.uk/portal/servlets/AttachmentShowServlet?ImageName=327028).

### **THE CELESTIAL SLEUTH AND *THE WOMAN IN WHITE***

Professor Daniel Olson, a physics professor at Texas State University, has recently published *Further Adventures of the Celestial Sleuth; Using Astronomy to Solve More Mysteries in Art, History, and Literature*. (Springer Praxis Publishing, Chichester, ISBN 978-3-319-70319-0). The mysteries cover such varied topics as the life of Monet, Ansel Adams in Alaska, the Korean War, J. M. W. Turner, the comets of Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*.

Olson, using astronomical data, diaries, letters, newspapers, weather reports, and other scientific data, makes a detailed analysis of Collins’s famous walks – both in the novel where Hartright meets Anne Catherick and the real life walk from the Collins’s home in Hanover Terrace to the house of John Everett Millais in Gower Street. On this walk Wilkie is reported to have first met Caroline Graves, the main account of which is described in the biography of Millais by his son John Guille Millais published in 1899. This can be read at [www.paullewis.co.uk/wilkie/biography/Millais1905.htm](http://www.paullewis.co.uk/wilkie/biography/Millais1905.htm)

For Hartright’s walk, Olson uses astronomical data, walking speeds, and other information to locate “the place where four roads met” at the start of *The Woman in White*. He calculated the date to around the full moon of 31 July 1852. Members may recall that Paul Lewis made a

similar analysis in *Walter's Walk* (WCS 2010) but put the location rather further north and calculated the date as Summer 1853.

Olson's Collins analysis covers 22 pages complete with copious illustrations, maps and references but forms only a small part of a fascinating book based on meticulous research and experiment. Further details at [www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319703190](http://www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319703190).

## **WILKIE COLLINS AND PPI**

Wilkie was fortunate in not receiving financial cold calls and emails for PPI but he did suffer from Plagiarism, Parodies and Imitations. The most recent of these is *A Most Dangerous Woman* by Brenda Clough. It purports to be "A thrilling and romantic standalone sequel to Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*." It mainly uses the character of Marian Halcombe, "Victorian literature's most exciting heroine." It is serialised in nine episodes at [www.serialbox.com/serials/mostdangerous](http://www.serialbox.com/serials/mostdangerous). Each episode can be downloaded for \$1.99 or the entire work bought for \$12.99.

Clough's story follows closely on *Coup de Pierre: A Murder Mystery in 1850s Paris* by Paul Bristow. (FeedARead.com Publishing, 2016). A mystery set in Paris during September 1852, it uses the characters of Franklin and Rachel Blake (Verinder). The family lawyer, Mr Bruff, also makes an appearance. See the Summer Newsletter, 2018, for further details.

Recently discovered by Pierre Tissot van Patot, is *Young Lord Stranleigh*. Robert Barr. London: Ward Lock & Co, 1908. It features a large motor yacht called 'Wilkie Collins' with a captain and the chief engineer named respectively 'Wilkie' and 'Collins'. There is also a copy of *The Woman in White* in each cabin with a different colour to match the décor. Yet another example is *The Hawksmoor Mystery* by W. H. Lane Chauford (Ward Lock, 1932) where a valuable diamond is stolen from an Indian Temple and twenty years later strange events occur in an English country house.

And most recently, there has been published a homage to Collins by Elly Griffith, a crime writer based in Brighton. Her latest book is a murder mystery which features a host of tributes to Wilkie Collins. It is told through diaries and accounts by several authors including the main character, a teacher called Clare Cassidy, her daughter, Georgia, and a detective Harbinder Kaur. The whole tale is contained within a rather good gothic framing story by R. M. Holland called *The Stranger*, also of course an invention by Griffiths. Elly Griffiths is a fan of Wilkie Collins and the fictional Clare Cassidy peppers her diaries and accounts with quotes from his works. There is an annoying anachronism about a framed photograph hung on a wall dating from 1832 - seven years before Daguerre perfected his images on silver and two decades before paper photographs became common. The image is among other early Victorian photographs which Elly helpfully points out are 'all black and white'. Nevertheless, the book is thoroughly enjoyable and you will probably not be able to guess the murderer. Elly Griffiths's *The Stranger Diaries*, Quercus 2018 (£12.99 or much less via Amazon, and £8.99 for Kindle.)

Would Collins would have appreciated these the posthumous borrowings, especially knowing how hard he fought for the protection of his copyrights? We doubt it but, in any event, they have been listed in the accompanying compilation which runs from 1860 to the end of 2018.

### ***THE RED VIAL***

WCS member Caroline Radcliffe, editor of the recent edition we published of *The Red Vial*, reminded the Wilkie Collins Facebook group that 160 years ago on 11 October 1858 Wilkie Collins's controversial play *The Red Vial* was performed for the first time at the Olympic Theatre in London.

*The Red Vial* was mocked by the audience – which laughed at moments of dramatic tension – and generally panned by the critics. Nevertheless, it ran for 30 nights at the Olympic closing on 13 November. It is even possible Wilkie made some money from it – in November 1858 several unidentified payments were made into his mother's bank account (Wilkie used her account until he opened his own in 1860). But he found the audience reaction troubling and upsetting and refused all subsequent offers to revive the play. It was eight years before he returned to the theatre with *The Frozen Deep*.

In 1862 Wilkie wrote: "The Red Vial traces the slow degrees by which circumstances distort the love of a mother for her child into the commission of a crime by the mother for the child's sake" and he reworked the plot for his novel *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880). You can read Caroline Radcliffe's excellent introduction and analysis in the copy of the play which we sent out to members during 2018.

### **MILLAIS PARTY**

A new letter has emerged which reveals that Wilkie hosted a party on Saturday 9 June 1855 for the artist John Everett Millais before he left London for Scotland to marry Euphemia ('Effie') Chalmers Gray in Perthshire on 3 July 1855. Edward Lear wrote to Alfred Tennyson on 9 June

Collins has just now written to say I will dine there at 6 to meet Millais, who sets out tomorrow for Perth. He says "do come and see the last (for us) of John Millais". So I throw over a lesser engagement and shall go. I feel woundily like a spectator – all through my life – at what goes on amongst those I know – very little an actor.

(Tennyson Research Centre, Lincolnshire Archives, TRC/LETTERS/5415).

Perhaps Lear was referring to the bawdy nature of such events. A few weeks later Wilkie invited some friends round for another party on the eve of Millais's wedding. He wrote to his long-time friend Edward Pigott inviting him to join John Luard, the painter and close friend of Millais, and Wilkie's friend Charles Ward with his wife. In that letter Wilkie writes

We dine at six, and shall drink limitless potations. May he consummate successfully! and have the best cause in the world to lie late on Wednesday morning! I can't resist Prianpian [*sic* for 'Priapic'] jesting

on the marriages of my friends. It is such a dreadfully serious thing afterwards, that one ought to joke about it as long as one can. (Collins to Pigott, 2 July 1855 [0215]).

Millais wrote to Charles Collins the day after his wedding

By George, Charlie, I am truly a favoured man... It is such a delight to feel a woman always about one part of oneself. (Peters, p. 126).

## GOSSIP ABOUT WILKIE COLLINS

Another letter has come to light written by a Scottish born journalist called David Gray (1836-1888) who worked on the *Buffalo Courier* in New York State and then acquired an interest in its rival the *Buffalo Express*. Gray writes to a friend Alfred Wilkinson

I wish I could wind my horn some Saturday outside your castle gate on the hill yonder & smoke one of those good cigars in your library, & tell you a number of things I have had in mind for you. I should like also to ask some questions: such as your further opinion of Wilkie Collins. I have heard some rather unpleasant gossip about him. (David Gray to Alfred Wilkinson, 24 October 1873, Lewis Collection).

Wilkinson was probably the wealthy banker who lived in neighbouring Syracuse. The subject of the gossip is unknown. At this time Wilkie was on his American tour but he did not visit Buffalo until two months after this letter was written, arriving on 29 December 1873 and leaving on 7 January 1874. It may have related to the fact that the American Literary Bureau, which acted as Wilkie's agent when he first arrived in America, had booked him, without his knowledge or agreement, to give a reading to the Buffalo Young Men's Association. Unaware of the appointment Wilkie had not turned up. However, the date of that non-event is unclear but it was revealed by Wilkie's new agent, James Redpath, in an apology to the *Buffalo Courier* during Wilkie's visit. For more information on Wilkie's time in Buffalo see *Wilkie Collins's American Tour, 1873-4* (London: 2008) pp. 65-69, written by WCS member Susan Hanes.

## LOST PORTRAITS

There was a good deal of publicity concerning a lost portrait of Charles Dickens which came to light in an odd lot at auction in South Africa. The miniature was painted by Margaret Gillies in 1843 and shows the 31-year-old Dickens. See for example *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* for 21 November and *The Times* for 22 November 2018. There is much more detail and a reproduction of the image in 'The Lost Portrait: *Charles Dickens* by Margaret Gillies' by Emma Rutherford in the latest issue of *The Dickensian* (No. 506, Vol. 114, Part 3, Winter 2018). See also the website of the Charles Dickens Museum which is trying to raise £180,000 to save the picture for the nation. Should you wish, you can make a donation at <https://dickensmuseum.com/pages/lost-portrait-appeal>

There is also a lost portrait of Collins which has evaded discovery. It was painted by Walter Goodman and entitled 'The Late Mr. Wilkie Collins at the age of 56'. The painting was exhibited in 1890 at the sixty-seventh annual exhibition of the Royal Society of British

Artists. It was priced at £42 but was presumably unsold as there were reports in the *Times Daily* and *Sunday Times* for June 1891 that Goodman was attempting to sell it to the Garrick Club. But where is it now?

## ROYAL ACADEMY

William Collins is a noticeable omission from a battle in a new Royal Academy gallery which pits John Constable against J. M. W. Turner. The gallery hangs side by side Constable's *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge* and Turner's *Helvoetsluis*; – "*The City of Utrecht*" 64 going to sea. The last time they were next to each other was 187 years ago at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1832. They were later said to be the subject of great rivalry between the two Royal Academicians. But it is not clear that contemporaries saw it that way. The account of the Exhibition in *The Times* only mentions the Constable, placing it second to the similar scene *The Opening of London Bridge* by George Jones (1786-1869). *The Times* critic says the Constable painting was

A clever, bold painting, rough and coarse, but possessing nevertheless some fine qualities which having produced the artist has done his best to spoil, in his accustomed manner, by sprinkling white spots all over the canvass. (*The Times* 8 May 1832, p.3).

The critic fails to mention Turner's sea scene at all out of the thousand or so works exhibited. He also omits any reference to the three paintings exhibited there by Wilkie's father William Collins RA. They were hung in the Great Room at that 1832 Exhibition, while the Constable and the Turner were confined to the smaller room called the School of Painting.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we see Turner and Constable as two giants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Collins barely a footnote. But it was not so at the time. One of Collins's paintings, *Rustic Civility*, was sold at the 1832 exhibition to the Duke of Devonshire for 250 guineas and it went on to be one of William's most popular works, reproduced in engravings and prints for many years. He painted a copy of it the next year for the collector John Sheepshanks which is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It shows two country lads opening a gate and saluting a passing gentleman rider, who is shown only as a shadow on the ground.

*Skittle Players*, a scene in the yard of a public house, was sold in 1844 to George Young for 400 guineas. Within 20 years it had been sold at auction for almost three times the price – 1150 guineas while at the same 1866 sale Constable's *Hay Wain* – now priceless – fetched just 1300 guineas. Constable's *Opening of Waterloo Bridge* exhibited in 1832 was sold for just 94 guineas fifty years later. In 1875 *Skittle Players* doubled in price again to 2300 guineas. It is fully described by Wilkie in his biography of William Collins (Vol. II, pp. 6-10) and you can see an image at [www.paullewis.co.uk/wilkie/Family/skittlespic.htm](http://www.paullewis.co.uk/wilkie/Family/skittlespic.htm).

Taste and artistic appreciation change, of course, but throughout much of the nineteenth century William Collins was among the artistic greats, both among the public and wealthy collectors.

The exhibition runs from 12 January to 31 March 2019 in the Collection Gallery at the Royal Academy.

### **A CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ FOR WILLIAM COLLINS**

WCS member Alan Bean is working on a definitive catalogue (a catalogue raisonné) of William Collins's oil paintings. He writes:

Until about five years ago, and in common with many people, the only two books by Wilkie Collins that I had read were *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. That all changed when I bought a lovely watercolour of a girl gathering mushrooms by Wilkie's father, the artist William Collins. I hadn't heard of him before, and tried to find out more about him. It was soon very clear that next to nothing had been written about the artist since 1848, when Wilkie published his biography of his father *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins Esq., R.A.* I began to read biographies of Wilkie Collins in the hope of learning more. I learned very little more, but I did become sufficiently interested in Wilkie to join the Wilkie Collins society and start reading more of his novels and short fiction - I've just finished *Poor Miss Finch*.

One thing led to another, and I began in-depth research about William Collins and his paintings. In 2017 the Wilkie Collins Society very kindly published a pamphlet which dealt with part of that research – 'Wilkie Collins's religious upbringing.' My research has brought me into contact with many admirers of his work – museum curators, private collectors, and academics – all of whom have expressed the hope that the artist can be rescued from obscurity and recognised for what he was – one of the handful of great English painters of the first half of the nineteenth century. So now I am working on a catalogue raisonné of his oil paintings. I am also trying to get a small exhibition of his work off the ground as part of that work.

The location of quite a number of his paintings is not known at all at present. Many others have been through the salerooms in the last thirty years, so photographs of varying quality are available, but the whereabouts of the paintings themselves are not known. Major auction houses have been as helpful as they can, for example by contacting owners with whom they are still in touch, but they are bound by rules of confidentiality and there are strict limits on what they can do to help me find them.

So, if you know the whereabouts of any of his paintings (apart from the few which are in public collections), or indeed own any of them, I'd be very glad to hear from you. Naturally, I do not disclose details of the private ownership of his paintings to third parties, and the information I hold about their whereabouts is held securely. Do please get in touch with me by email if you have any information which you think might be useful - my email address is [asbean@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:asbean@blueyonder.co.uk). (Alan Bean).

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